The Devil's Mantle

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THE DEVIL'S MANTLE

FRANK L. PACKARD

BOOKS BY

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THE ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE
THE WIRE DEVILS
THE SIN THAT WAS HIS
THE BELOVED TRAITOR
GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN
THE MIRACLE MAN

THE DEVIL'S MANTLE

By

Frank L. Packard

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THE DEVIL'S MANTLE

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CHAPTER I

A BIRD OF PASSAGE

THE night was hot, unbearably sticky, enervating. Even the tropical shower, that rattled like the tattoo of a corps of snaredrums on the galvanized iron roof of the bungalow, seemed to have brought with it nothing of refreshment.

Seated in what was obviously a combination sleeping and working room, Peter Blake leaned negligently back in his chair, sucking at a pipe that was very black in the bowl and hopelessly disreputable from much scraping. He was a very young man, still in his early twenties, broad-shouldered, six feet in height, with a not-unbecoming shock of light brown hair, and a pair of pleasingly steady gray eyes; his white shirt, all that encased the upper portion of his body, was open at the neck, displaying a wide expanse of muscular chest that, like his face, was tanned almost to the color of bronze; for the rest, his attire consisted of a pair of canvas shoes and a pair of duck trousers, which latter, in lieu of a belt, were fastened at the waist with a colored, but somewhat faded kerchief.

Peter's eyes roved in a sort of whimsical appraisal around the room, embracing in their survey the cot bed

over against the wall, the native mats on the floor, a duplicate of the cane easy chair in which he lounged, a shelf or two of books on the wall, and a writing desk littered with papers, tobacco, glasses and a bottle of gin. He had been looking at this room, or ones almost precisely similar, for the last two years; he was wondering at the moment in what God-forsaken spot he would come upon the next one.

This particular room, however, had a touch of individuality which marked it as somewhat apart from its fellows that were to be found, wherever white men were, on countless other islands that dotted the tropical seas. This touch of individuality was embodied in a safe which, though of enormous proportions, was patently of very ancient design, since a huge key that protruded from the lock proclaimed its birth to have antedated the age of modern mechanism.

Peter's eyes fixed now on a sharp-faced, bearded man of middle age who sat on a camp stool before the open door of the safe, and at whose side, on a small table, lay numerous little heaps of pearls—obviously in the process of being sorted.

The sharp-faced man rose suddenly from his stool, stepped across to the writing desk, poured out a drink for himself, stared for a moment at Peter, and returned to his seat.

"Well, I must say, you're the most amazing sort of chap that it's ever been my luck to run across!" he exclaimed. "Here you insist on leaving on account of that bit of a row this afternoon, and yet you do not seem to bear me the slightest animosity."

Peter's lips expanded in a broad grin.

"Not in the slightest, Mr. Murchison," he said genially. "As a matter of fact, I bear you no end of good-will. You are one of the bright spots in an

otherwise somewhat hectic career of late. Good Lord, any man is likely to lose his temper, and"—he grinned still more broadly—"I've even been guilty of it myself! I haven't given that a second thought, sir. But you know as well as I do, since the row occurred in the presence of some of the natives, that it will be all over the island in less than no time, and my authority will have received a gentle little knock on the head that I'm afraid it won't survive. It's to your interest if I'm on the wing again."

"I'll risk that," said Murchison curtly. "I've told you that's an entirely exaggerated view of it. You'd better think it over."

Peter shook his head.

"No earthly use," he said, with his engaging grin again. "I warned you when you picked me up in Vavau that there was nothing permanent about me. I should have been off again in another month or so, anyway. The last thing I'd want to do would be to make it awkward for you; but you won't have any trouble in getting some one to carry on with the bit of job I've been holding down—and I certainly won't go until you do."

Mr. Murchison was obviously of an irascible disposition—he thumped the table suddenly with his fist, and the little heaps of pearls ran in riot one into another.

"Damn it," he exclaimed, "you don't seem to get me right! There'll be no trouble, not the slightest, in filling your place. I'm apparently fool enough to be thinking about you. When I picked you up in Vavau you were stranded. According to your own story it wasn't the first time. You've been, to put it mildly, aimless since the war, and that's over two years ago now. I don't know what you did in the war——"

"Oh, frightfully restricted activities, sir," said Peter pleasantly, and once more his grin broadened. "Youth has its drawbacks. I didn't get into the blooming show until it was almost over."

A smile relaxed the elder man's features.

"Damnation, Peter," he exploded, "I like you—that's the whole trouble. And you're just a carefree, irresponsible idiot. You're a bird of passage. You can carry that a bit too far, though! I've lived in the islands here for thirty years. I've seen them get many a man when he lets himself drift. Even birds of passage have to end up somewhere, you know. I'll tell you where it is. You'll find their carcasses strewn on a hundred beaches—human birds dead from mental inanition and gin-rotted livers. I don't want to see you go that way."

"That's very decent of you, sir," said Peter gravely—and helped himself, in turn, to a drink from the bottle on the desk. "I appreciate all you say—but I'm afraid it's no use. I fancy it's in my blood—not an irresponsible contentment in drifting the easiest way; but what, I suppose, is more a restless spirit of adventure, if you know what I mean. I haven't a relation in the world, not a soul who could in any way be affected by anything I did or did not do, and"—he leaned back suddenly in his chair and laughed infectiously—"I've tremendous faith in my destiny."

"My word!" ejaculated Murchison a little helplessly. "And may I ask where, specifically, as the next stopping point, you expect this destiny of yours to lead you, when you leave this island?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, sir," replied Peter naïvely. "That's the charm of it."

"H'm!" grunted Murchison. "What you need, young man, is a jolt hard enough and nasty enough

to wake you up body and soul, and I hope to God you get it before it's too late! If you think you can play with life, you're calamitously mistaken. Why the devil can't you ever take things seriously?"

Peter did not answer for a minute. He had lifted his glass to his lips, and, over the rim, his eyes had rested on the slatted window-blind just opposite where he sat. The thing seemed to move very stealthily, very slowly. Peter sipped at the contents of his glass. The interstices between the slats were plainly in evidence now—and now a pair of eyes stared into the room.

"I do sometimes, sir," said Peter quietly, as he set down his glass. "Don't show any particular interest in what I am saying, or look in that direction, but there's some one outside the window with his face glued to the slats."

"The devil!" exclaimed Murchison.

"Possibly!" smiled Peter—and rose leisurely from his chair, yawned, stretched himself and walked toward the door. "I'll try to find out."

He opened the door of the room in a nonchalant fashion, stepped out into the little hallway of the bungalow, and with a "good-night" flung casually over his shoulder, closed the door behind him. But the next instant Peter's movements were as swift as a hound's unleashed to the scent. He sprang to the front door, swung it open, dashed outside, and with a bound was around the corner of the bungalow. Then, with a sort of incredulous gasp of surprise, he halted. It was intensely black and the rain was coming down in torrents, but the yellow threads of light seeping out through the interstices of the blind illuminated the immediate vicinity of the window adequately enough. There was no one at the window—no one in sight.

Peter frowned grimly.

"No possible error about his having been there!" muttered Peter—and began to run again.

Half-crouched, hugging the walls, Peter made a quick circuit of the bungalow. He accomplished nothing except a drenching. He was, however, far from being satisfied. Once more he made a circuit of the bungalow, but in the opposite direction this time, and this time cautiously, pausing at every few steps to listen. And again he was no better rewarded. The patter of the rain was enough to drown out any slight sound that would be made by any one moving warily; and he could see nothing at any distance away.

It was a bit hopeless! He might widen his radius of search and go down there on the beach a few yards away, or prowl amongst the trees around the bungalow —neither of which courses would reflect credit on his intelligence. The eyes were gone; and their owner held the trump cards. The fellow, whoever he was, and whether deceived or not by his, Peter's, attempt at nonchalance in leaving the room, had taken no chances when a movement was made toward the door.

Peter shrugged his shoulders, and entering the bungalow, returned to Murchison's room.

"Well?" inquired Murchison.

"Gone!" said Peter laconically.

"Too bad!" growled Murchison. "I'd like to have caught the beggar. I'd have made an example of him that would have put a stop for good and all to this petty thieving that's been getting worse and worse of late. I think you said it was a tin of marmalade that was stolen last night, and——"

Peter pushed his dripping hair out of his eyes.

"I'm wondering," he said coolly, "if it was the—marmalade."

"Eh?" queried Murchison, a little puzzled.

Peter was staring at the pearls which, in his absence, Murchison had divided again into their several little piles.

"Oh!" said Murchison, with a faint smile. "You mean these?" He jerked his head toward the pearls. "Absurd!"

"I don't see anything absurd about it," said Peter. "They're worth a good few thousand pounds, aren't they?"

"They're worth a good *many* thousand pounds," Murchison answered bluntly. "Even this one alone" —he indicated one that lay a little apart from the rest —a magnificent pink pearl.

"Yes," said Peter. "Well, it's more or less common knowledge that, while you live here and own this plantation, you are, primarily, a rather large speculator in pearls; that you frequently make trips, which are really buying expeditions, to the beds. You returned from one, after an absence of three weeks, this morning. The presumption would be that you have a valuable collection of pearls with you; and that presumption, to one person at least, has become an established fact. Whoever looked in that window saw them. You and I are alone in this bungalow. The servants are in their own quarters back of the clearing a good few hundred yards away. There isn't a white man within two miles of us. Why is it absurd?"

"Because," explained Murchison coolly, "it would do no one any good to steal them. He couldn't get off the island with them—not till the next trading boat touches here, and that would then be watched. Old Sullie only put in here this morning on my account, and, as you know, was away again before I had barely reached the shore." He laughed suddenly. "And that

applies to you, too, Peter. I accept your resignation temporarily, but you can't get away, either, for some little time."

"If you like," suggested Peter irrelevantly, "I'll make up a shake-down and sleep in here with you tonight."

Murchison emptied his glass, and smiled quizzically.

"And to be logical," he observed dryly, "sleep here every other night thereafter while the pearls are in the bungalow, which will be for a good many nights—or until you follow your destiny again, which will likewise not be for a good many nights, either! You'll do nothing of the sort, Peter; it's rank nonsense—to say nothing of you being near enough at hand even to hear me snore through the partitions—though, damn it, my lad, I appreciate the offer. I've had pearls here in greater quantities than this time and again, and have kept them by me for months, and I've been doing it for twenty years or more, and I haven't lost one yet. The only thing you need worry about on account of that prowler is another raid on the marmalade!"

Peter's gray eyes made a circuit of the room, fastened on the slits of the window-blind in a frowning way for an instant, shifted to the pearls and finally to Murchison's face.

"Well," he said slowly, "perhaps you are right; but I can't say I feel any the easier about it."

"Nonsense!" said Murchison again. "Have another peg, and then either go and change your clothes, or turn in—you're soaking wet."

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said, "if you feel that way about it." He moved across the room, mixed a gin and tonic, drank it, and started toward the door. "I'll turn in, then; it must be getting well on past eleven."

"Right!" said Murchison. "And, Peter!"

Peter swung around in the doorway.

"Yes?" he asked.

"About that other matter," said Murchison, and coughed a little awkwardly. "That bit of a row and all that, and your decision to pull out, you know—we'll have another talk about it, and see if we can't find a way to make you change your mind."

Peter was sucking again at his disreputable brier.

"I've already changed my mind," he said.

Murchison sat up with a jerk, and stared at Peter.

"Eh?" he ejaculated heavily.

"I shan't leave the island while the pearls are here," said Peter quietly.

"I'm damned!" gasped Murchison.

"Good-night, sir," said Peter—and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER II

THE FIGHT

PETER raised himself on his elbow and looked at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. Murchison had given him the wrist watch a month ago. Rather decent of old Murchison! The man had a beastly temper that spouted like a volcano at times, but there was a bigness about Murchison, and a fineness that made him tremendously likeable—a bit of a "fathering" attitude, as it were, whose sincerity and sense of fair play robbed it of any suggestion of intrusion or offense. Peter smiled a little whimsically in the darkness. Murchison, though the two men were physically as unlike as any two humans upon earth, always made him think of Sir Martin Hadley, that very staid and eminent family solicitor, that charming and delightful, but at times exceedingly irascible, old gentleman, who, until the death of Peter's father, some four years ago, had been the later's lifelong friend.

"We ain't got much money but we do see life!" muttered Peter, with a reminiscent grin. "I'm afraid I horrified the old bird—Sir Martin, I mean."

It was fourteen minutes past two.

Peter's head dropped back on the pillow. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep awake. Perhaps he was a fool. He had changed his wet clothes when he had left Murchison, but he was still fully dressed. He had even put on his jacket—and in the pocket of his jacket nestled a revolver.

Flung on a chair near the foot of the bed was an

oilskin coat. Twice since leaving Murchison, he had stolen out and made a circuit of the bungalow—and on the last of these occasions he had gone farther afield—as far as the native quarters in the rear, and, in the other direction, down across the beach to the small dock where Murchison's motor boat was moored. Nothing! There had been no sign of life or movement anywhere. Murchison had put out his light several hours ago, and obviously had gone to bed.

Peter listened.

Another shower was beating its tattoo upon the roof. It made no end of a racket, but it was a sound that ordinarily he liked at night because it always had a sort of lullaby effect upon him, as it were. It was trying to lull him off to sleep at the present moment. He cursed it now savagely, fervently.

There was one way to keep awake—get up and go outside, and make another round of the bungalow. Well, he would presently.

Wasn't he making a bit of a fool of himself—exaggerating things a little? It was fairly certain that the man who had looked in through the window-blind knew that he had been seen; and, in that case, if Murchison were right, and the prowler was merely the thief who had been making paltry inroads on the stores for the last month, the man certainly would not be back again to-night—therefore, even the excuse for this self-imposed vigil on the ground of at least hoping to catch the petty marauder counted not at all. Peter admitted this to himself—otherwise he would, to be logical, have had to spend the night in the store-room.

On the other hand, Murchison's dismissal of the prowler's presence on any other score was logical enough, too. Peter listened grimly to the loud patter

on the roof. Possibly! But he wasn't dealing in logic. What, then? Presentiment? All his life he had scoffed at presentiment, and that sort of thing. Well—what? He did not know. Without reasoning about it, he felt morally certain that something more than the proposed theft of a can of marmalade had brought those eyes to the window slats. Perhaps he was wrong; he hoped he was, naturally—but the thing had got hold of him, that was all. And got hold of him hard enough to have prompted that last remark of his to Murchison—that he had changed his mind about leaving the island, which, concretely, meant that he would not leave Murchison while Murchison kept those pearls here. And in view of that decision, if logic was to enter into the affair at all, he thereupon could hardly have returned to his room, rolled himself up in bed, and gone placidly to sleep! Well—he hadn't. He was lying here awake! Murchison's room was just across the little hallway, and since tropical partitions were known for their exceeding thinness and contemptuous denial of all sound-proof properties, he, Peter, as Murchison himself had facetiously remarked, should be able even to hear the other snore; certainly, in spite of the rain, he would be able to hear any unusual sound in Murchison's room—and he had heard nothing.

Peter frowned heavily, as he stared through the darkness. This was all very well, but where did it lead—if nothing happened to-night? Eventually, when some trader put in—not necessarily the first one, by any means—Murchison would take his pearls down to Sydney or Auckland, and dispose of them; but in the meantime—since he, Peter, of a sudden had become logical—it would logically devolve upon him, Peter, to lie awake every night like this for an in-

definite period extending over possibly several months!

Peter made a wry face—and of a sudden raised himself on his elbow again, but this time with extreme caution. He was facing the door, and he stared in that direction. It was intensely black and he could not even make out its outlines, but it had seemed to him that he had heard a faint metallic rattle, as though the door-knob were being stealthily turned. Yes, he was sure of it now!

Peter's jaws were suddenly clamped. So something *was* in the wind to-night! He felt a sort of grim satisfaction in the fact that he had not, as he had almost argued himself into believing, made a fool of himself; and he knew a sudden cold and ruthless eagerness now to get to grips with the, so far, elusive owner of that pair of eyes, who, in a somewhat sinister fashion, had initiated whatever game it was that, undoubtedly now, was to be played out to-night.

Peter's hand slipped into his jacket pocket and came out with his revolver. The door hadn't moved any; at least, he did not think it had—but he couldn't be sure. It was too dark to see. And there was not a sound now—save the incessant patter of the rain on the roof. He, or they, or whoever it was at the door, counted him asleep, of course—and were cautious and stealthy in their movements. Well, two could play at that game!

He swung one foot out over the edge of the bed, raised himself silently inch by inch into an upright position, and then, in spite of caution, the bed creaked slightly—and on the instant, a voice spoke, not from the doorway, but from somewhere, it seemed, inside the room—or, perhaps, it was from the window.

"Don't move, or make a sound," said the voice in cool, ugly tones, "or it will be the worse for you!"

But Peter obeyed neither the one injunction nor the other. His brain was working with lightning swiftness now. In a flash, he swung his body a little farther forward, and suddenly shouted at the top of his voice.

"Murchison, look out for yourself!" he shouted—and his voice drowned out another faint creaking of the bed as he dropped swiftly to his hands and knees on the floor.

He was answered by a savage, guttural oath, a flash, the roar of a report. He heard the whine of a bullet above his head. He fired instantly in return at the flash, and as instantly shifted his position. Two more shots rang out, which he placed definitely now as coming from the window, and, as their tongue-flames stabbed through the dark, he caught a vague, momentary glimpse of something moving quickly and silently—like two shadowy forms. They had come and gone so swiftly, however, that it might be mere hallucination; but it had seemed to him they had come from the direction of the door, as though they had darted into the room and then become almost instantaneously lost again in the darkness.

Peter was lying now against the wall on the floor at the foot of his bed—the window, with the bed between, was at the far end of the room; the doorway was obliquely across from where he lay. But he could see nothing.

There was not a sound now.

Peter's lips were a thin line. Not only was there no sound here, but there was no sound from Murchison's room. *Why?* His shout of warning had been loud enough, to say nothing of the revolver shots. A sort of cold horror suddenly took possession of Peter—and was almost instantly succeeded by a surge of grim, passionate fury. Had they been in Murchi-

son's room *first?* Murchison hadn't been awake. They hadn't found Murchison *awake* . . . that was the difference. . . .

Peter felt the sweat beads ooze out suddenly upon his forehead. No, that was impossible—it *must* be impossible. He, Peter, would have heard the sound of any unusual movement. How could he have helped but hear it? True he had been out to reconnoiter around the bungalow, but the rest of the time he had lain here fully alert. Why, then, was there no sound now, no sign from Murchison? An ugly possibility came suddenly, bringing renewed disquiet to Peter's mind. He had been outside—had even on the last occasion gone quite a little distance from the bungalow—had they, whoever were here now, got in then, got into Murchison's room where God knew what had happened, and then waited to come in here until, as they thought, he, Peter, was asleep again? But why should they have waited? Why should they come in here at all—he, Peter, didn't have any thousands of pounds' worth of pearls in his possession. Damned queer . . . damned queer that there was no sign from Murchison. . . .

There was no sound—even the banging of the raindrops had ceased during an interval in the showers. It was utterly, impenetrably black. Peter could not make out, except in the most indistinct of outlines, the foot of the bed, though it was but a few inches away from his eyes.

He lay immovable—waiting now. He could see nothing; but he *knew* that others were in the room, waiting, listening, just as he was waiting and listening, for a sound, an audible breath, the stir of body movement, the temptation to seek relief by changing the position of a cramped leg or arm, that would dis-

close one's exact whereabouts. How many were there in the room? He had seen two shadows—and then, besides, there was still another, not in the room perhaps, but a third man who had fired that first shot from the window—fired it from outside the window presumably. That made at least three to cope with.

They had not expected to find him armed—that was what made them so cautious now. A minute passed —another. It couldn't be more than that, but to Peter it seemed like some interminable period of time—and the nervous tension grew and grew. And now he began to imagine sounds, slight movements from every corner of the room, and the silence itself began to *thud, thud, thud* at his ear-drums in tempo with his pulse, and imaginary shapes took form in the darkness, shapes that, from here and there, came creeping stealthily upon him.

Peter rated himself savagely. This was bad. He was getting a little jumpy. Perhaps that was what they expected, and that, as a result, he would make some irresponsible movement which would indicate the precise spot where he lay. After that he would have about the same chance as a cornered rat! They didn't mean him to get out alive. Nice business! They'd probably already done for Murchison.

The thought brought a surge of fury again, sweeping away, in a sudden, overwhelming lust for vengeance and an elemental desire to kill, all thought of his own peril. Well, what was he to do? He listened intently. That was the sound of breathing, wasn't it—and *that* was the faintest of scraping sounds, as though a button had rubbed upon the floor—as though some one were crawling inch by inch somewhere in the room? No; he wasn't sure! If there were two of them or more, and each made a circuit of the room in opposite direc-

tions, and did it quietly enough, he was caught. But if he could pot one of them first, the odds wouldn't be so heavy. Where were they? He couldn't risk anything on supposition; but—a queer smile came to Peter's lips—there was a way to find out!

Cautiously, without a sound, Peter thrust his left hand into his trousers' pocket. Almost *anything* would do. He brought out a shilling piece. With still more caution now, Peter raised himself to his knees to give free play to his arms. And then, alert, every muscle tense, his revolver outflung a little from his side, he tossed the coin gently toward the rear wall of the room. It fell with a low, tinkling sound upon the floor—and Peter, looking to see a blaze of revolver shots directed at the spot, found no other vent for his feelings than to shrug his shoulders in a sort of grim, philosophical way.

The silence remained unbroken. His ruse hadn't worked. The trick had resulted in nothing save to force upon him the unpleasant realization that his situation was perhaps even a little worse than he had imagined. They were too wily to be drawn like that. He was dealing with no fools.

Another minute passed. Again the silence began to thud at his ear-drums. A new thought came. Suppose this was all imagination—suppose those shadows and the open door had been pure hallucination induced by nervous excitement. Suppose the room was empty. In that case *he* was the fool—lying here listening to nothing but the pounding of his own heart, while he tossed bits of money childishly around the room!

And then in an instant he had made up his mind. Anything was better than this—whether they were outside or inside, the end had to come sometime. Far better to force the issue than to remain inactive; and

far better to do the stalking than to be the stalked—and he might even be able to get out of the room itself.

Peter was on his hands and knees again, and now he began to move forward by scarcely the fraction of an inch at a time. He could not see the door, but he knew its exact location; it was almost directly across the room from where he lay. He headed in that direction. He made no noise. It was quite probable that some one was guarding the door—the man who had fired from outside the window, say—but if he could come upon the other unawares he had at least an even chance of getting through, and once outside himself the tables would be turned.

It was slow work, unconscionably slow. After an interval of what he judged to be not less than three or four minutes, he estimated that he was not more than a quarter of the way across the room. The rain began to patter again, at first in a desultory fashion, heralding another shower—and then a downpour came thundering upon the roof. Peter, with set lips, hurried his movements now. Thanks to the rain he could risk a little noise. He gained a yard—and still another. He must be halfway across now. The darkness seemed more impenetrable than he had ever imagined that darkness could be; for, as he crawled, his hands, working out before him like the forepaws of an animal, became invisible each time they were extended at full length. The revolver bothered him a little; he did not dare take the chance of replacing it in his pocket, and, therefore, it forced him, when his right hand was on the floor, to bear his weight on his closed fist and knuckles.

Still another yard! He blessed the rain now. He was almost within striking distance of the door—al-

most near enough to spring to his feet and make a leap for it. Two more yards would do it. His left hand reached out as he drew himself forward; then his right hand; then his left again—and, instead of the floor, his hand touched something soft—like flesh—like the flesh of another hand.

There came a startled shout almost in his ears—and then the flash of his own revolver and the flash of another seemed to meet in a blaze that, in the sudden transition from darkness, stabbed at the eyeballs with a blinding light. He felt something sear hot across his temples above the hair line—and then hands were gripping at him, clawing at him, and his arms were wrapped around the body of his antagonist.

Over and over on the floor they rolled. He still held his revolver but he was at too close quarters to use it—it even hampered him, but he clung grimly to it. Twice the other's fingers clutched at Peter's throat, and twice Peter tore them loose. Hoarse cries sounded in his ears—he heard the quick, sudden rush of feet coming toward him from, it seemed, all directions.

And then from somewhere came a tiny, momentary flicker of light—as though a match had been struck and instantly extinguished. It showed him nothing save that it was a white-clothed man with whom he fought—but it had obviously served its purpose as a guide to the others. A form, as though it had come hurtling through the air, flung itself upon his neck and shoulders—and another, and still another, until he was buried beneath a writhing human mass that grunted horribly as it pounded and struck at him.

But now Peter fired, for he was no longer employed in keeping a single pair of fingers from his throat, and though his hand that held the revolver was pinioned,

as it were, by the weight of the bodies upon him, it was also enmeshed amongst them. There was a muffled roar, a dull red flash, curiously smothered, that came up out of the ruck—and a shriek.

Again Peter fired—and then the weapon was wrenched suddenly from his hand. But with the shots, as though through shock and surprise, and though fingers still clutched at him and the weight of bodies bore him down, Peter sensed an instant's relaxation in the ferocity of the attack upon him—and in that instant the massive shoulders of the man heaved upward, and, flinging from him the forms that hung to back and neck and shoulders, he gained his feet.

And then again and again Peter struck. There was mad, unholy passion in his heart now, an untrammelled fury seething within him. In and out his arms worked like steel battering rams, and, as his fists crashed into yielding flesh, gasping cries, and panting breaths, and snarls like the snarls of wild beasts answered him.

Around and around the room he fought them, now tripping over a chair, now using one as a bludgeon until, shattered to pieces, it became useless. Twice they fired at him, and missed; but they seemed chary of using their revolvers, as though fearful, with the swift movements all were making, of hitting each other in the darkness. But they were always upon him; lunging blows at him from every side—no, not lunging at him, slashing at him with knives now, for the sleeve of his jacket had been cut from the elbow down, and flopped crazily around his wrist every time he struck in return.

Peter's mind worked in quick, staccato flashes as he fought. Some of them were natives . . . most of them perhaps . . . he had felt naked arms and

shoulders . . . not all natives, though . . . there had been a white man's voice at the beginning . . . but whatever they were, there seemed to be more of them now than ever . . . yes, he knew there were more . . . there were more even now rushing in from the doorway . . . he could hear them over the horrible gruntings and the sharp, sibilant stabs of shortened breath around him, and . . .

A low sound, like a quick gasp for breath, came suddenly from Peter's lips. A man had leaped upon his back, and Peter felt something sharp cut deep along his side, and then the man's arms were encircling his neck as though to strangle him. In a flash Peter bent his body almost double; his hands shot up, snatched at the other's shoulders, and with a wrench, with every ounce of his strength behind it, he sent the other catapulting over his head. He heard the sharp outcry, the crash of impact as the other struck with terrific force upon the floor; but Peter heard something else also—a strange, inconsequent surging in his ears.

Flashes of red danced before his eyes; something sticky hot was trickling down his back; and then a sudden giddiness overpowered him—and he pitched forward unconscious upon his face.

CHAPTER III

ADRIFT

THERE was no pain; only a curious numbness of both brain and body, a sort of detached consciousness, as it were, as though he, Peter, were an onlooker at some scene in which he was the central figure, and yet into which he could, by neither voice nor movement, project himself. He heard voices; he knew that he was being carried in a brutally callous way by some man of great strength, for he was slung across the other's shoulders and his head and arms, over which he had no control, dangled loosely down the man's back.

The sense of movement ceased abruptly. A voice spoke gutturally:

"I don't know whether he's dead or not; it's a toss up, I'd say."

Another voice laughed—a laugh soft as a woman's—there was something horribly incongruous in it—it seemed to ripple out in dulcet, musical notes.

"It makes very little difference," purred this voice. "He will be presently, in any case. Throw him into the boat; take care to lash his body to a thwart, so he won't float away when we get far enough out to sink her."

Peter felt himself falling—as though he was being pitched away from the shoulder of the man who had been carrying him—like a sack of meal, limply. That thought came to him . . . limply . . . like a sack of meal. And then his body, crumpled up, struck with a crash; there was an instant of intolerable pain—and then nothingness.

When Peter opened his eyes again, he became conscious of a violent pitching motion, of the sweep of wind in his face, of a furious onward rushing at great speed through space. But that aloofness of brain which had before so strangely detached himself from himself, as it were, was gone now. And now, at first, he bitterly regretted that change. Previously there had been a blissful absence of pain, except for that one brief instant at the end; but now pain was the one dominating sensation. Something stabbed and stabbed in hideous rhythm and tempo at his back, causing him excruciating agony—and, in lesser degree, his entire body ached as though it had been bruised and battered without mercy. And his brain seemed to be stupidly obsessed with only that one thing to the exclusion of all else—pain—whereas there was so much else that mattered. Where was he? What had happened?

His head seemed to be hanging over, his arms dangling down again. He moved his arms, but did so only with difficulty—they were free, but the strength seemed to have oozed out of them.

He raised his head—and stared around him. His vision seemed to play tricks upon him; many things danced before his eyes, but they were shapeless, nameless things, blurred, indistinct outlines that rose up ghostlike out of a vast surrounding blackness. He moaned in pain through shut teeth. He reached out with his hands and found that a rope was coiled around the small of his back and around what seemed to be a narrow flat board across which he must have been flung, for he became aware now that his legs were without support, waggling this way and that in unison with that violent pitching motion which had been the first thing to impress itself upon his consciousness.

His brain was clearing now. That was the sound of water, wasn't it?—the *slap, slap, slap* of it, as though a boat beat with her nose at a never ending succession of waves—the faint hiss and gurgle of it, as though the wash rushed swiftly past a boat's sides.

A boat!

Peter gave a sharp cry. Yes, that was it! A boat! He remembered now. He was to be thrown into a boat and lashed to a thwart so that he would sink when they had gone far enough—somewhere—he did not quite understand that—but far enough—somewhere—to sink the boat.

He raised his head again, as high up now as he could, and again stared around him. He could see better now. Perhaps it was returning reason that augmented his sight. It was a tremendous effort to hold his head up like this—but there was something out there that now seemed to possess a fascination for him that would not be denied. It was huge and phantomlike and some distance away, but it was always there, and always exactly the same distance away—a gray-black smudge on the night. A faint sound came down with the wind—like the creak of a boom.

Peter's head dropped. It swam dizzily—but he had seen, he knew. It was a sailing vessel of some sort.

"I'm being towed," said Peter in a sort of curiously confidential way to himself. "I'm being towed—somewhere—to where it's far enough to sink the boat."

His hands were free. Wounded and unconscious, and left for as good as dead, they had cared little about his hands. For some reason they were going to sink

the boat—somewhere—and he was tied to the boat merely in order that his body would sink with it. Perhaps Murchison was here in the boat, too!

Peter's fingers could not quite reach the knots. He was face downward and the knots were tied at the middle of his back. The sweat beads stood out on his forehead now as he wriggled and twisted in an effort to shift his body a little—just an inch or two—so that his finger tips could touch the knots. It was bitter work, for, with the pain of every movement, his senses threatened to leave him. Once for a moment—or many moments—all went black before him.

And then finally reaching their objective, his fingers began their struggle with the knots. But there seemed to be no strength in his fingers. He plucked and plucked at the knots. Again and again he lay still, in utter exhaustion, sucking his breath in through his clenched teeth—a man near done.

He began to rave a little.

"Murchison . . . Murchison . . . !" he called.

There was no answer.

The rope became loose around his body. He kept tugging at it. And then, with one of the violent pitches of the boat, he found himself lying on the bottom.

For a moment he lay without movement. He was very dizzy, very weak. But he could afford to be neither dizzy nor weak. They were going to sink the boat—somewhere—and he was to sink with it. He was being towed. The corollary was obvious to even his sick and whirling brain. In some way he must cast off the boat. He couldn't unfasten the tow-rope. That would be impossible with the strain and weight of the boat upon it. He wasn't strong enough. It

would have to be cut somehow. Yes; that was it. Cut it! It was so dark they would never know; and so dark that, even if they discovered almost immediately that the boat was adrift, they would have very little chance of finding him again.

But he had no knife.

He sat up now, straining his eyes about him. He could just make out his immediate surroundings. Something almost within his reach took on a familiar aspect—he stretched out his hand and touched it. Yes, that was what it was—the fly-wheel of an engine. He was in a motor boat.

And then Peter laughed a little, in a hoarse, uncontrolled sort of way. Of course! A motor boat! Then, it must be Murchison's—the one that was always moored to the little dock. And if it was Murchison's, then there was a small locker aft of the engine, and there were tools in the locker—something with which he could cut the motor boat adrift from that thing out there ahead that went on and on through the night like some evil, silent phantom pulling the motor boat to destruction in its wake, and . . .

Peter clenched his hands.

"Brains growing wobbly again!" Peter snarled at himself. "Phantom be damned! Cutthroats and curs, that's what they are! Get a grip on yourself, you fool!"

There was no time to lose. How could he tell how long it was since they had left the island! How could he tell how near they were to that "somewhere" that was to be the end of the motor boat's journey—and his!

He began to crawl toward the stern. Perhaps Murchison *was* here after all—lying somewhere here

on the bottom of the boat. He called again. No answer. He reached the stern; and his fingers, fumbling, found the locker. His hand groped around inside. There wasn't anything with any cutting edge to it except a cold chisel. Well, a cold chisel and a hammer, then!

With these in his possession he crawled forward again—this time to the bow of the boat. He gritted his teeth against the pain, as he raised himself to his knees—and, swaying with weakness, pitching with the pitch of the boat, he began to hack at a small hawser that stretched out over the bow to where a wraithlike thing, with filmy sails that towered high to the heavens, danced and curvetted out there in the night ahead of him.

It was not easy, though the hawser, made fast inboard, lay stiff and taut enough across the bow. His blows were feeble; and sometimes the hammer, because of the darkness, and because of the roll of the launch, went wide of its mark and bruised his hand and wrist and fingers. He struck grimly—again—and again. Strand after strand he severed—and the last one parted with a sharp, angry snap.

The sweat was pouring from Peter's face. It ran into his eyes. He drew his arm across his eyes, wiping them with the sleeve of his jacket—and stared out ahead of him. The wraithlike thing was gone. There was nothing there now—nothing—just the night—just blackness.

The chisel clattered to the bottom of the boat from Peter's fingers, and Peter's knees slid away from beneath him.

And the hours of darkness passed in merciful unconsciousness for Peter. Then the dawn came. And then the sun blazed down upon the drifting boat, and

upon the figure, curiously crumpled, that lay inert in the bow.

It grew hotter—still hotter. In the late forenoon Peter stirred. His faint cry was inarticulate—a hoarse, croaking sound that emanated from parched lips. His eyes were burning with an unhealthy brilliance out of a red, fever-flushed face.

"Water!" Peter croaked.

He was consumed with thirst. His body was on fire. His blood burned him up. He stared about him in sick amaze. And then gradually understanding drifted back upon him. But primarily he understood that there was no water.

Peter raised himself upon his elbow. It brought him agony—as though a thousand fiends were at his back intent upon exquisite torture. His brain reeled. But he persisted. He got his head up above the level of the gunwale. There was nothing—nothing but the blazing sun that scorched his eyeballs—nothing but that and an endless sweep of sea. And then suddenly he cried out sharply. He was wrong! There *was* something! Right out of the sea over there appeared a grove of trees, cool, shady, a great avenue of them; and winding, twisting, bubbling through this avenue was a stream of crystal water. But the boat, rather than approaching the trees, seemed to be receding from them.

Peter's head sank down again. A bitter laugh came from him. It was only another form of torture. A mirage! He thought about that for a time. Perhaps it wasn't a mirage. How did he know it was a mirage? It might be—but also those trees might be real. He didn't know how far the boat had been towed, or where it had drifted since he had cut it loose. It was possible those trees might even be on

Murchison's island. It was possible. Anything was possible. But whether it was a mirage or reality, the boat was drawing farther and farther away from it. The thing to do was to drive the boat toward it anyhow.

Peter began a grim journey toward the after end of the boat. It was a matter of perhaps two yards to the engine. It took him an interval of time that was measured only by periods of dizzy flashes, by moments of oblivion, by the pain to which he succumbed in payment for every few inches of progress.

And at the end a mirage in truth mocked him. He might have known! Yesterday, he could have turned the engine over without thought of effort; to-day, the fly-wheel was as some fixed immovable thing that taunted him for his weakness and his impotence. He fought with it, gnawing at his lips, until he fainted.

He was too far gone to start the engine. Thirst became more and more intolerable; the trees had disappeared; the sun grew hotter—and it reflected on some small, bright object that seemed to protrude from one of the little squares of grating on the bottom of the boat there in the stern. It annoyed him. The glint hurt his eyes; but he could not keep his eyes from straying to it every now and then. The thing became an obsession. The more he tried not to look, the more he looked. He became intolerantly angry. He cursed the thing. It was a long way to crawl in order to pitch it overboard. He couldn't crawl that far.

His mind was wandering a little now. There was old Sir Martin Hadley, the very correct family solicitor. Perfect type! Awful stew the dear old beggar had been in—couldn't understand a chap breaking away from the conventions—beastly things, conventions—it wasn't done!

Peter blinked his eyes at the bright, glittering object, edged angrily a little way toward it—and desisted because it hurt him to move.

"Water!" said Peter thickly.

Suddenly Peter smiled. *She* was there again. It would only be for a moment—just as it had been that night. There she was in the lobby of the theater that was crowded with women in evening wraps and men in evening clothes, all making their way out to the street, laughing, chatting, jostling, after the play. She would come nearer, and their eyes would meet—just for a moment—but that moment would be one of those moments which would stand out in after life, imperishable, sometimes fraught with a great wistfulness, and sometimes with reactions that make of memory a curse. After that she would pass out into the foggy London night, and, because the crowd would have surged between them, she would be lost to him.

He anticipated the scene, prompted by a strange, passionate hunger in his soul. He had lived it a thousand times since that night two years ago.

Yes; there she was! There—with some soft, lacy thing about her, through which there came the gleam of ivory shoulders. And now he could see the full, white throat—the chin daintily uplifted—the hair, shining under the brilliant lights, crowning her head with gold. Now she would look. The moment had come. There was no reason why she should look. They had never seen each other before. They had neither touched nor brushed against one another. There were even three or four people between them. But she would look.

Now! There was laughter in her face, responsive to something that her escort had said, perhaps; laughter in her eyes that were blue—a blue such as

he had never seen before, but which in the afterwards, on many a beach and many a ship, he had discovered in that glorious unpaintable blue of the sunlit tropical sea. And then the laughter died out of her face, and died out of her eyes. Their eyes were meeting, holding one another with strange intensity—as though a thousand years ago in some forgotten world and some forgotten way they had known each other. And in that long gaze there was a startled wonder in her eyes, a troubled questioning, a great amazement; and in his, he knew, unbidden, his soul. A color came, faintly pink, to tinge her cheeks—and she was gone—swept as swiftly and as abruptly out of his life as she had entered it. Nameless—a memory—immortalizing a moment.

Gone!

Peter lifted a haggard face.

"Water!" Peter mumbled.

That damned bright, shiny thing was still there! Well, he *would* get it! Why should it torment him, and pierce his eyes with stabs of pain every time the sun touched it! He crawled along—made a foot—lay exhausted—made another foot—and, grimly determined now, cursing the object, his weakness and the agony he imposed upon himself through his efforts, he finally reached out and grasped it.

Peter stared at it. He wasn't angry with it any more. Possession seemed to have robbed him of his antagonism. It was a key, of course—but it was a very curious looking key—a slender key—very delicately and intricately finished as to its wards and notches. It was perhaps three inches long, and scarcely more than an eighth of an inch in width, and its thickness seemed to be little more than that of a piece of paper. And yet for all its slender proportions

it was not flexible. Peter passed his tongue around his parched lips. Perhaps it was because he had no strength left—perhaps that was why it wasn't flexible.

What did it matter? It was a curious thing anyhow—too curious a thing to throw overboard. It wouldn't bother him if he kept it out of the sunlight—that was the main thing. Peter put it in his pocket.

The sun grew hotter.

The boat drifted on through the hours.

Another dawn came . . . the pitiless sun. . . .

Peter lay in the bottom of the boat—motionless—his face hidden in his outflung arms.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH A REWARD IS OFFERED

IT was said of Humphrey Garth that he could command more ready money, and on shorter notice, than any other man in the Commonwealth of Australia. At sixty he was a grim-faced, shaggy-eyebrowed man with thick gray hair. He had made his fortune mostly in "wool"; but his interests with the years had widened—vastly. Big things. Steel, shipbuilding, far-flung financial enterprises—even in London, Humphrey Garth of Sydney was a man of power. He lived lavishly; he spent lavishly. He possessed a superb home and estate just on the outskirts of Sydney; he maintained a magnificent ocean-going yacht. He was widely known; and like all men of his station in life, who are subject to public appraisal, that appraisal ran freely up and down the scale; and, from being a "good old sort" to some who might for reasons hold to that opinion, he was, to others, for reasons held equally as valid, a tricky, shrewd and ruthless money-grabber, whose soul, if he ever had one, had long since surrendered itself to the God of Gold. Mr. Humphrey Garth, however, was in the habit of saying with a rather grim smile that he didn't give a damn what anybody thought about him.

He was sitting now on the veranda of his house in Sydney, and staring across a dainty tea-service at a golden-haired girl with wide, laughing, blue eyes who sat opposite to him.

The girl's laugh, low and mellow, rippled out.

"Why, father!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea you cared in the least for that sort of thing!"

"Don't!" said Mr. Garth shortly. "Not as a general rule. I'm not sure I do at all. I suppose it adds something to the sum total of human knowledge, and Rand seems tremendously serious about it, as though the Bank of England would collapse if he didn't carry on, but I can't say I could ever work up much enthusiasm over prowling around after fossils, and digging up prehistoric eggs, and studying the habits of man-eating head-hunters at first hand."

"And yet," said the girl, slyly, "you've seen quite a lot of him of late, and helped to make a fuss over him—you've even invited him out here this afternoon; and we're giving, I believe, a rather formal dinner for him to-morrow night."

"Huh!" said the multimillionaire. "Quite another matter, Marion—quite another matter! The man's famous, of course. Known everywhere—Singapore to London."

"But you don't like a man well enough to accept the sort of invitation we are talking about, merely because he happens to be famous, do you?"

"Do you?" countered her father bluntly.

Marion laughed and shook her head.

"I don't know him well enough to say whether I like him or not, if that's what you mean," she retorted. "But I certainly should not like him just because he had contributed some admittedly valuable papers to the leading scientific journals. It means at least six weeks, or two months."

"Well, I'm rather keen to go," said Mr. Humphrey Garth with sudden decision. "At least, he's an interesting beggar, and he doesn't fling those prehistoric eggs of his at your head every time you speak to him.

Modest with his achievements even to the point of reticence, I'd say—I like that. They say he's got an amazing place, a regular museum, up there on that island of his. And then, another thing—the date just suits me. Two weeks from now I shall be ripe for a little holiday—need it, by Jove! And a week or ten days at sea will be just what I want. In fact I was thinking of proposing a cruise somewhere with no definite objective in mind."

Marion got up from her chair, stepped quickly around the table, and laid her hands on her father's shoulders. To Marion her father was her all; there were but the two of them, and she had never known her mother.

"I'd love to go, father," she said simply. "It will be a wonderful adventure up amongst those strange wild islands that nobody ever visits—I've always wanted to see them."

Mr. Humphrey Garth screwed his head around, glanced a little quizzically at his daughter, and then, drawing her face down to his, kissed her.

"Of course, you'd just *love* to go—because I want to go," he smiled. "I don't know whether to believe you, or not. But, I'll take you at your word, and call it settled."

"Since it must be somewhere"—Marion hummed her paraphrase gayly—"it might as well be there."

"Exactly," laughed Mr. Humphrey Garth of Sydney boyishly. "And there's Herman Rand now, if I'm not mistaken."

From where they were sitting at the corner of the great house, the view extended in one direction out over that incomparable harbor that is all Sydney's own, and in the far distance the "Heads" could be faintly discerned; inland, the eye met a magnificent

grove of trees, and a cool, winding avenue that led up to the house. It was along this avenue that a motor car was now rapidly approaching.

"Yes, that's Mr. Rand," said Marion, as the car swept around to the front entrance and she caught a glimpse of its occupant.

She rang for more tea.

The tea and the visitor arrived almost simultaneously. Marion found herself appraising the man from a new and critical point of view. Her father's decision transformed Mr. Rand from a quite casual acquaintance into a personage with whom a certain degree of intimacy must hereafter inevitably exist. One did not accept an invitation as a house guest on a lonely island for an indefinite period without being thrown a good deal into close contact with one's host! She watched him now, as he came forward along the veranda toward them. He was tall, very dark, quick and lithe in his movements; a man, she judged, of perhaps thirty-eight or thereabouts, and by no means bad-looking—that is, she decided, if one didn't pick his features to pieces. If one did that, of course, the lips were a little too long and thin, and the jaw was terribly hard, and the eyes were too small and too close together. But then, of course, one could pick any one to pieces! Certainly, he looked decidedly *healthy*—a man who obviously lived his life in the open, his face bronzed, and——

"I'm afraid I'm a little late," said Rand apologetically, as he shook hands with Marion and her father.

"On the contrary," said Mr. Humphrey Garth pleasantly, "you arrived at exactly the psychological moment. We had just decided that the opportunity of paying you a visit up in that queer part of the world of yours was far too alluring to lose."

"Really!" exclaimed Rand heartily. "You're coming, then? Both of you? Well, I *am* delighted! I was hoping you would—but I knew it was rather a large undertaking, and I had my fears. I can't tell you how glad I am. I've got to go over to Auckland, as I told you the other day, and then I and my bit of a schooner will strike straight for home, and I'll be there in time to welcome you."

"Why not send the schooner on from Auckland, and come back here yourself and go up with us on the yacht?" suggested Mr. Garth.

"That's awfully good of you," said Rand warmly. "There's nothing I can think of that I would like better; in fact, to be perfectly honest, I was almost going to have the temerity to suggest it myself. Yes, indeed, I'll accept with the greatest pleasure. It would give me more time both here and in Auckland, and I half-promised a lecture in Melbourne, which——"

"Settled!" said Mr. Humphrey Garth.

"Cream and sugar, Mr. Rand?" asked Marion.

"Clear, please," said Rand.

"Any particular news?" Mr. Humphrey Garth nodded toward a newspaper protruding from Rand's pocket. "I see you've got a paper. I treated myself to a day off, and I didn't go to the office to-day."

"No," replied Rand; "no news of any particular moment except for a rather beastly affair up in the Talimotu group. A couple of weeks old now—though the news is just in here. Trading boat brought it to Fiji or some wireless station up north, I suppose."

"What is it?" inquired Mr. Garth.

"Why," said Rand, "a young Englishman by the name of Peter Blake, a sort of beachcomber and

general all-round waster, I take it from his description, murdered a planter he was working for, and decamped with a collection of pearls valued at a good many thousand pounds."

In a strangely slow, tense way Mr. Humphrey Garth leaned forward in his chair.

"And the planter's name?" he asked in a low voice.

"I think it was Murchison," said Rand. He pulled the newspaper out of his pocket and consulted it. "Yes, Murchison—Thomas Murchison."

"Tom Murchison—*murdered!*" Humphrey Garth's face had set in sharp lines. There was sudden intense bitterness in his eyes. His hands were tightly clenched on the arms of his chair.

"Daddy Tom!" The words came in a low cry from the other side of the table. Marion had risen from her chair and was standing there a very rigid little figure, very white of face.

Herman Rand set down his tea cup awkwardly as he looked from one to the other.

"You—I—" he stumbled as awkwardly with his words—"I am inexpressibly sorry that I should have brought this news. I—I see that it touches you both very closely. I had no idea——"

"Let me see the paper," said Mr. Garth hoarsely.

Mechanically Rand placed the newspaper in the other's hand.

"Mr. Rand," said Marion, and, in spite of an obvious effort to steady her voice, it broke a little, "you won't mind excusing me for a little while, will you? This"—the tears were very near to the blue eyes, dimming them now—"this is——" She did not finish the sentence. Her head a little averted, she walked quickly along the veranda and disappeared into the house.

Rand, who had risen courteously, stood watching the girl's trim figure until the door closed behind her; then he fumbled in his pocket for his cigarette case, selected a cigarette, and, as he turned his attention now to Humphrey Garth, stood tapping the cigarette on the edge of the case in a helpless sort of way.

Humphrey Garth looked up from the newspaper.

"Sit down, Rand," he said huskily.

Rand resumed his seat.

"I'm afraid," he said, with a mirthless smile, "that I am a bird of very ill omen indeed. It is evident that this has been a frightful shock to Miss Garth."

"About the same as though some one had suddenly informed her that something of like sort had happened to me," said Humphrey Garth in a strained, monotonous voice. "Next to myself, I suppose Tom Murchison was nearer to her than anybody else. He was her godfather. He played with her when she was a baby, and they were pals when she grew up. They were like lovers in a way. Always a letter in every mail—months apart, of course, but never a mail missed; and never a trip to Sydney that Tom Murchison didn't live here with us—one of the family. You heard her. She called him 'Daddy Tom.' As for me, Tom Murchison was my oldest friend—and the best man that ever lived."

"Good God!" Herman Rand breathed.

Humphrey Garth jumped abruptly to his feet and began to pace up and down the veranda. Herman Rand, watching, saw the man of millions brush his hand hastily across his eyes; but, when Mr. Garth halted finally again before his visitor, his only sign of emotion was a dogged, merciless anger that burned in narrowed eyes and was reflected in the square jaws, hard, clamped, and now outthrust a little.

"It's two weeks ago," Humphrey Garth said grimly. "We can't do anything for poor Tom, but——" He picked up the paper once more, and read it slowly, critically—then he tossed it down on the table again. "Rand," he said abruptly, "you know more about the islands and the life up there than probably any other man alive. Where do you suppose that hound Blake got to?"

Rand shrugged his shoulders.

"That's rather a large order," he said grimly. "It wouldn't be so difficult for him, though. He had a motor boat, and he took all the spare cans of petrol with him—quite a supply according to the account. He could easily enough under the circumstances make his way from one island to another, and so on, until he picked up a trading vessel somewhere and got clear away. He had a good start before the news got out—and he was probably counting on that. He's as likely to be making for Sydney at this moment as anywhere—or quite as likely to try for Java, or China, or the Straits Settlements, or anywhere else. It was a cold-blooded and calculated piece of work. I'd say he'll be a hard man to catch."

"Will he?" inquired Mr. Humphrey Garth with a significant inflection in his voice. "I suppose the police are already at work?"

Again Rand shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, yes, of course!" he said. "And they'll do what they can. Circulate his description, and all that sort of thing, and probably offer a reward of a few pounds."

"How many pounds?" demanded Mr. Garth sharply.

"Why, I don't know," Rand replied. "Anywhere from ten to a hundred, I'd say."

Mr. Garth stared at the other for a moment.

"Ten pounds—a hundred pounds!" he echoed. And then he laughed shortly. "That won't start anything. That won't do any good. That won't incite the average man on the street to look into the faces of the men he passes, or keep his ears open in case something might give him a clue to the whereabouts of this Peter Blake, or induce whoever might be sheltering the scoundrel to give him up—Blake would outbid them. It wouldn't interest the average man, would it?"

"No," said Rand.

"No," said Mr. Garth. "Well, I'll take care of that! I'll interest the average man, and I'll make the scum, the larrikins, and the shady characters *greedy!*"

He got up, rang, and resumed his seat.

A servant appeared.

"Ask Mr. Jaffray to come here at once," instructed Mr. Garth.

"Yes, sir," replied the maid.

A moment later, a young man came along the veranda, and halted before the table.

Humphrey Garth introduced the two men.

"Mr. Rand," he said, "this is my secretary, Mr. Jaffray. Jaffray—Mr. Rand."

Jaffray acknowledged the introduction and looked inquiringly at Mr. Garth.

"Jaffray," said Mr. Garth gruffly, "I have just received some very bad news. Mr. Murchison was murdered in his bungalow some two weeks ago by a man named Peter Blake."

Jaffray stared at his employer almost uncomprehendingly.

"Mr. Murchison—*murdered!*" he exclaimed faintly.

Humphrey Garth picked up the newspaper and handed it to his secretary.

"The details are there. Never mind them now. You can read them on the way to the city. I want you to motor into Sydney at once. I am going to offer a reward for the capture of this Peter Blake. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir," said Jaffray in a subdued voice.

"Good," said Humphrey Garth curtly. "You'll see the police, and the newspapers, or whoever you have to see, in order to have the reward given official recognition and publicity. Then cable or wireless it all over. See that it's known in Singapore—up in Fiji—everywhere. And without a moment's delay. The man has already had too long a start."

"Yes, sir," said Jaffray. "And the amount of the reward, Mr. Garth?"

"Five thousand pounds," said Humphrey Garth laconically.

Jaffray had small black eyes. A sort of startled incredulity came into them for a moment.

"Five thousand pounds!" he repeated. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Garth—did you say five *thousand* pounds?"

"I said five thousand pounds," returned Humphrey Garth a little sharply. "And I would like to have you attend to the matter at once."

"Yes, sir," said Jaffray quietly. "I will go immediately." He bowed to Rand, and hurried off along the veranda.

Herman Rand's cigarette was still unlighted. He lighted it now.

"That's a rather large sum of money, Mr. Garth," he ventured slowly. "I should say that it would interest most men—let alone the average. I'm not pre-

pared to say that I wouldn't be interested in it myself. I'm quite sure your secretary was. Five thousand pounds is a lot of money."

Humphrey Garth's hands were clenched again on the arms of his chair.

"Do you think so?" he said, with a bitter laugh. "Well, I'll tell you something, Rand. I'll spend a hundred thousand, yes, or two hundred, if I have to, to bring the murderer of old Tom Murchison to justice!"

CHAPTER V

PROFITABLE CARGO

A *TAPA* cloth hung across the entrance to the hut. It shut out the faint breeze that was stirring, but it also shut out the intense glare of the afternoon sun. Peter stared at the thing. It had become hideous to him—the design was irregular, chaotic, as though born of a nightmare; its pigments were of deep black and a rusty red, and the circles and lines all seemed to run together in every direction, and it hurt his eyes. But he couldn't help staring at it. His eyes, when he opened them, always reverted to the thing, and he was possessed of an insane desire to measure the circles against each other to see which was the largest, and the lines against each other to see which was the longest.

The *tapa* cloth was of a piece in his mental calendar with the flooring of the hut, which was made of broken coral, and over which was spread the native mat upon which he lay; both existed in his consciousness from the hour that the first faint glimmerings of reason had returned to him, and that, he knew, was many days ago. He had never become accustomed to his hard, uneven couch with its sharp bits of coral, and, like the *tapa* cloth, it plagued him.

He had been very ill. He was still ill—and pitifully weak. When he had been able to wonder about it at all, the wonder of it had been that he had lived. The natives had been kind, very wonderfully kind, but the nourishment of a white man, desperately sick, was not *tafolo*—he did not know the native tongue,

but the correlation of the oft-repeated word with the oft-repeated serving of the dish had taught him that *tafolo* meant coconut milk, in which there swam endless and uninviting hunks of breadfruit.

And yet he had lived. He was even regaining his strength—very slowly, it was true; but none the less surely. Yesterday, in the cool of the evening, he had even walked a few steps along the beach down there on the edge of the lagoon. To-day, he would go again—in another two or three hours it would be cool enough. Damn that *tapa* cloth! If he could only sleep through those two or three hours!

He closed his eyes and fell into a drowse. Strange dreams came, uncanny, fitful snatches of things that had no beginnings and no endings; and after a while, out of the vagaries of this fantasy, it seemed as though a voice was insistingly calling his name. It came in a sort of sing-song fashion: "Hello, Peter Blake, my lad. . . . Hello, Peter Blake, my lad. . . ."

"Hello, Peter Blake, my lad!"

Peter Blake sat suddenly upright, wide awake. He stared around him. The hut was empty, and the *tapa* cloth still hung across the entrance. But he could have sworn the voice was real, actual, existent.

"Who's calling me?" he cried out.

The *tapa* cloth was jerked aside and a white man's figure suddenly filled the low and narrow entrance. The man was rubbing his hands together in a sort of gleeful and complacent manner.

"Ha!" ejaculated the man. "Rather neat, I call that! Admit you're Peter Blake, then, don't you?"

Peter rubbed his eyes. Perhaps he was still dreaming! The man was short and stocky, with enormously broad shoulders; he wore pants and shirt without

any coat; he had a tawny beard that looked self-clipped, and a white cap with a black visor crowned a shock of brick-red hair. Peter rubbed his eyes once more.

A white man at last! Unless it *were* a dream! Only this one talked as though he were mad!

"Why shouldn't I admit it?" Peter inquired a little helplessly.

"No reason," said the man promptly, "seeing as how it wouldn't do you no good anyhow in the long run, but I was just as glad to check up on it from the start. Not that there was much doubt about it, mind you! There's the motor boat down there on the beach with the name *Marion* still all nicely painted on her, which tallies with the description, and here's you here. So now, sonny, my lad, where's them pearls?"

Peter stared blankly. The red-haired man stepped forward into the hut. He was followed by a group of natives, amongst whom was the towering figure of Hafu, the chief. Peter's eyes, wandering from the white man's face, met and held those of the chief. He did not understand. Hafu, who had been kindness itself, who, indeed, had put this hut at his, Peter's, disposal, was glaring at him now with a sullen, unpleasant scowl.

Peter shook his head. His eyes reverted to the red-haired man.

"If I wasn't afraid that I was still wobbly enough in the head to be the one who is a little mad, I'd certainly say you were," he observed quietly. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"That's too bad," drawled the other. "And I'm disappointed in you, Peter Blake, after starting out with such a clear understanding right at the beginning.

But maybe you've still got them in your clothes, eh? —not that you've got many clothes left. But, anyway, we'll have a look."

The man advanced on Peter—the blue eyes under the straggling, thick, red lashes had grown steely. Peter, lurching, gained his feet, and stood there swaying from one foot to the other.

"Who the devil are you, anyway?" he flung out savagely.

"Mumm's my name," said the other. "Captain Josephus Mumm, of the schooner *Break O' Dawn.* And there ain't no manner of use you putting your dukes up, for any one with half an eye could see that you ain't got strength enough to swat a fly. Now, soft and easy does it, my lad! Let's have a look through them pockets of your'n."

Peter retreated a step.

"Not yet!" he rasped out. "I want to know what this is all about."

"All right, my bucko," said Captain Josephus Mumm gruffly, "if that's the game you've decided to play from now on, I'll do my best to be obliging. It's Tom Murchison's pearls I'm talking about."

For a moment the words were flat and meaningless to Peter, and then a strange buzzing seemed to beset his ears.

"Tom—Tom Murchison's pearls!" He heard himself speaking, but the low, hoarse, faltering voice did not seem to be his at all.

"Aye," said Captain Josephus Mumm tersely, "Tom Murchison's pearls! That's what you killed him for, wasn't it?"

Peter's face went suddenly white beyond the pallor of his illness, and his hands knotted into tight-clenched fists at his sides. He lunged forward a step.

"God!" he cried hoarsely. "If I had the strength I'd ram those words down your throat, you swine!" He staggered a little—and brushed his hands, first one and then the other, across his eyes. "But you're mad—or I'm mad." He tried to think. This man was accusing him of killing Tom Murchison—of taking Tom Murchison's pearls. So Tom Murchison was dead! He hadn't been sure. Everything that night had pointed to it, of course, but he hadn't been sure. And now this man was accusing him of killing Tom Murchison—accusing him of murder. "Do you hear," he repeated furiously, "I'd ram those words down your throat if I had the strength!"

"That's all right," said Captain Josephus Mumm coolly, "but we'll handle this affair in as orderly a fashion as may be. One thing at a time. Them pearls now!"

Peter's nails bit into the palms of his hands. All this was grotesque, unreal, like those snatches of delirium that lingered in the memory from the long illness—this hut, these natives, this red-headed gargoyle. It was all preposterous—hideously so. But it was no good letting himself get out of hand. He wasn't strong enough to kick up a fuss. He was damnably tired, as it was. He sat down on the mat again. Ah, that was better! He steeled himself to speak quietly.

"You say that I killed Tom Murchison, and that I've got his pearls," he said. "I don't know why you say that, and I don't understand. I didn't kill Tom Murchison, and I haven't got his pearls—and this last, at least, is easily proved. Ask the natives here. I must have been unconscious when they found me. Ask them if I had any pearls. As for my pockets, or as for the pearls being on my person, they've been

decent enough to wash my things once or twice and I suppose have had me stripped to my pelt. That ought to be proof enough, oughtn't it?"

Captain Josephus Mumm plucked at his beard.

"H'm!" he grunted. "Well, I suppose you'd hardly be fool enough to keep 'em about you, and I'm willing to admit them clothes of yours *must* have been washed; 'cause they wouldn't look like that if you'd lain in 'em sick for a matter of near three weeks as you must have done, according to what these chaps say. We'll let that go. So where did you hide them, eh? That's the question now."

"I don't remember getting here at all," Peter answered evenly, "so I must have been unconscious when they found me. Therefore, I couldn't have hidden them, and unless they were on my person or in the motor boat, I couldn't have had them."

"H'm!" grunted Captain Josephus Mumm again. He turned and began to talk to Hafu in the native tongue.

Peter did not understand. There were many gesticulations. The red-headed man, while not fluent, seemed, however, to possess a passable working knowledge of the native tongue. At the end of a few moments he addressed himself to Peter again.

"He says they found the motor boat on the other side of the island away from the village here, and you wandering around amongst the trees. He says you were off your nut, but he never saw any pearls—the which is as it may be." Captain Josephus Mumm smiled a little sarcastically. "It's proof, anyhow, that you got out of the boat before you were found, and that you had a chance to hide the pearls."

"If you think so," said Peter curtly, "you'd better go look for them!"

"Not me!" said Captain Josephus Mumm grimly. "I'm hardly fool enough to start in digging up an island, and particularly when there ain't any profit in it for me—and, besides, I ain't any too sure his royal highness here is sticking strictly to the truth. How do I know but that he found them pearls on you when you were off your head, and that he's got 'em now? That's one thing the natives in these parts know the value of—pearls. You bet!" Captain Josephus Mumm pushed his cap to the back of his head, and drew his forearm across a dripping forehead. "Come to think of it, I guess I've lost interest in them pearls. If you've hid 'em and won't tell where they are, it ain't my job to hunt for 'em; and if his imperial nibs here has got 'em, it ain't my job to make him hand 'em over. I'm no hog, I'll have you know! If I got 'em, I'd only have to pass 'em on to the police when I got to Sydney, and nothing in my pocket to show for 'em. I guess I'm satisfied the way it is. Luck I was sore in need of, and finding you is luck beyond any calculations I've had since I was a kid and dreamed that one day I was going to be rich."

Peter passed his hand across his eyes wearily. The man was mad. He looked like some character out of a comic opera. It *was* a comic opera setting anyway —the hut was nearly full of natives now, naked but for their *lava-lavas* (some of which were extremely scant!); and a couple of chaps that looked like Lascars who had on white pants, and one of these had an abominable squint eye—a couple of the schooner's crew, of course. Beyond, through the entrance to the hut, as heads and shoulders moved occasionally, he could catch a glimpse of a tall, gracefully bended palm, and the shimmer from the blue lagoon—like the painted scenery that would make the background of

the stage. There should be some dusky beauties, though, making love to this man of the outrageously red hair, and the outrageously wide shoulders.

"I'm glad you look on it as a piece of luck—finding me, I mean," said Peter evenly. "You've been kind enough to accuse me of theft and of being a murderer, and when you get around to searching my pockets, as you probably will, you'll find my worldly wealth consists of some six or seven shillings, which, as passage money to Sydney, will be about as unprofitable, if not more so, than the freight rates you have been complaining about on the pearls you haven't got. I had a wrist watch, but, unfortunately for you, I am sorry to say it's gone—lost or stolen—I don't know which. Therefore, you must either leave me here, or feed and nurse me at a loss on the voyage to Sydney. I can't see where your luck comes in." Peter's voice grew suddenly savage. "I think you'd better leave me here, and run along!"

"No perishing fear, my lad!" said Captain Josephus Mumm, with a low chuckle. "Luck, I said; and luck, I mean. Trading's been very poor of late. Even ran out of water—that's how I came to put in here. And the first thing I see is a bit of a motor boat, with the name *Marion* on her, moored out there in the lagoon. 'Luck!' says I. 'But it's too much to hope for—he'll have gone weeks ago.' But you weren't! And now, my lad, you're going to be the most profitable cargo that I've handled since ever I've been at sea."

"You're talking in riddles to me," said Peter coldly. "What do you mean by profitable?"

"Five thousand pounds," said Captain Josephus Mumm, with a short laugh. "That's profitable, ain't it? Five thousand pounds—that's the reward that's

out for you, my lad; and paid on the nail, too, just for handing you over to the police in Sydney."

Peter stared at the other blankly for a moment, then he broke into a contemptuous laugh.

"You're mad!" he said. "I thought you were from the first—I know it now. You—you're a comic opera skipper sailing around the coral-girt isles of the sun-lit seas, and you're supposed to have escaped from a lunatic asylum, aren't you? Well, you're a bally hit in the rôle! Five thousand pounds for me because I killed Tom Murchison! The police wouldn't offer that much for a regiment of murderers!"

"Mabbe they would, and mabbe they wouldn't," returned Captain Mumm with a shrug of his shoulders. "But it's all posted up shipshape and official in Fiji. Saw it in Suva with my own eyes. And a description of you when you'd got more flesh on your bones than you got now. *And* the details of the crime."

Peter rose painfully to his feet again. His hands were clenched once more at his sides.

"I'd like to hear those details," he said through tight lips.

"Got a bad memory, have you?" inquired Captain Mumm sarcastically. "Well, right you are! Anything to oblige. Murchison had a lot of pearls with him the day he came back—maybe you'll remember that! That afternoon you and he had a nasty bit of a row that was witnessed by a lot of your natives, and——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Peter shortly. "It didn't amount to anything at all. There was some work that Mr. Murchison had wanted done in his absence—and it hadn't been done. He was quick-tempered, and so am I. He flew off the handle about it without asking for reasons, and so I flew off too—without

giving the reasons. It was a special bit of road we were building across the plantation, and a beastly spell of weather had jacked us up. Naturally, the natives didn't understand a word we were saying, and no doubt the row sounded a lot worse than it really was; but, as I say, it didn't amount to anything, and, when we had both cooled down, we both apologized."

"You can tell that to the jury," said Captain Josephus Mumm laconically. "The next morning Tom Murchison was found murdered in his room, stabbed to death, and the knife that did it, a sheath-knife, was identified as yours, and it was found covered with blood just outside the door where you dropped it without knowing it, or mabbe couldn't find it again in the dark, or because you were in a hurry, and the pearls were gone, and so was the *Marion,* and so was most of the extra supply of petrol from the store-shed—and so was Peter Blake."

For a moment Peter stared without a word. His brain was whirling in a riot of emotions. Horror and an insensate fury battled for supremacy; horror at the vileness of the deed—fury that he should be held the author of it. And then a strange mental calm came—and a night passed in review again before him—and queer snatches of conversation, unintelligible then, ghastly clear now, came back to him: *"So he won't float away—far enough out to sink her."* And then that laugh, soft as a woman's, rippling out in dulcet, musical notes! And a stark understanding came. He was the cat's-paw!

Peter tried to speak. His lips were parched and dry. He moistened them with the tip of his tongue.

"Listen!" he said hoarsely. "I see it all now. That night I saw some one looking in through the window

—looking at the pearls. I tried to catch him, but couldn't. Murchison didn't think it amounted to anything; but I did. So I stayed awake, and once or twice I went outside and made the rounds of the bungalow. It must have been on one of those occasions that they crept in on Murchison. I was attacked in my room and wounded—look!" He tore his clothing away and showed the knife wound in his side.

"I dare say Murchison put up a bit of a fight," drawled Captain Josephus Mumm.

"Damn you!" cried Peter furiously. "Damn you—listen! I became unconscious. The next I knew I was flung into a boat which I afterwards discovered was the *Marion.* I heard them say something about tying me to the thwart so that I wouldn't float away when they got the boat out far enough to sink it. I didn't understand then, but I do now—they were shouldering me with the crime. I'd never be heard of again, and it would be supposed that I had made good my escape in the *Marion,* and had likewise got rid of the *Marion* too, when I was through with her. I lost consciousness once more. When I came to my senses again, I found I was being towed out to sea. I was pretty sick. I couldn't see very well. I think it was some sort of a large sailing vessel. I managed to free myself, and cut the boat adrift. Then I was too weak to do much else. They lost me, of course, in the night. After that——"

Peter stopped abruptly. The red-haired man was sucking at his teeth with irritating persistency. Peter's face flushed.

"Don't you understand?" he burst out. "They must have known about the pearls, and they sailed in under cover of darkness, and they used me to cover up their tracks, and——"

Again Peter stopped, and again he flushed. Somehow the story sounded lame even in his own ears. He hadn't told it well—that was what was the matter—but his brain was sick and giddy.

"They've made a cat's-paw out of me," he said, trying to steady his voice.

"You don't say!" murmured Captain Josephus Mumm softly. "Well, I guess we'll get along—so's you can tell *that* to the jury, too! No good you making any fuss about it—what?"

Peter found himself speaking mechanically in a dull sort of way.

"No—no good," said Peter. "No good making any fuss about it."

Peter stared around the hut. His eyes met a ring of scowling faces. Very strange! Even Hafu was scowling. And yet Hafu and the rest of the natives had been kind to him far beyond the ordinary meaning of the word. He owed them his life. He was going away now, and he had very little with which to repay them. Just the few bob in his pocket. He thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out the contents. There were six shillings and a long slender steel key. He had forgotten about the key. He stared at it for a moment, then put it back in his pocket, and extended the money to Hafu. The native, with a grunt, refused it. Of course! That's what a man who had acted the way Hafu had, would do—only the man's eyes looked hard. Peter restored the money to his pocket and held out his hand. The native turned away. It was like a blow to Peter that had caught him unawares, and for a moment stunned him. Then a white misery crept into his face. God, he was a pariah—even amongst savages! He swayed a little on his feet.

"I fancy you and Durga had better carry him, Yar Lal," said Captain Josephus Mumm. "He's too weak to walk, I'd say."

The squint-eyed Lascar came forward.

Peter Blake's shoulders squared back, his teeth were set. He pushed the man violently away.

"Keep your filthy paws off me!" said Peter Blake—and walked unaided out of the hut.

CHAPTER VI

THE MUTINY

THERE had been bad weather—days of it—ten days of it. At sunset of the day Peter had come aboard, the *Break O'Dawn* had run into a northerly blow, and from that into a succession of gales each more violent, it had seemed, than the one before—and the *Break O'Dawn* had made but a poor fight of it. She was very old, even before Captain Josephus Mumm had picked her up for the proverbial song in Batavia—and that was ten years ago. She floundered now, little better than a hulk, crippled, an unlovely mass of wreckage, in a sea that swept her again and again fore and aft, and to which she rose in a sodden, helpless way, groaning her pain in every bulkhead and stanchion.

And it was a night of utter blackness, save when now and then a lightning flash cut a jagged, ugly streak through the inky sky. Peter, sea-swept, drenched, wind-lashed, stood at the schooner's rail, idle, save for the effort to maintain his position. It was more comfortable here, miserable though it was, than in the stuffy little cabin below. He smiled suddenly, mockingly to himself. Of all on board he alone had benefited by the voyage. The sea air and white man's food, coarse and badly prepared as that food had been, had brought him through a period of convalescence to almost perfect health again. And yet it had been ten days of hell.

From where he stood, Peter could make out one shape, and only one, upon the deck—a figure at the

wheel—little more than a blotch in the darkness, discernible only because of the faint glimmer from the binnacle lamps. But that did not mean that the *Break O'Dawn* was steering a "course." For days on end there had not been a glimpse of the sun, and no one on board knew her position, though Captain Josephus Mumm "guessed she was somewhere off the top-end of the Australian coast." With what was left to her of spars, and rigging, and rags of sail, she was hove-to, fighting now literally at her last gasp.

A sudden lurch tore Peter from his hold; a stinging sheet of spume lashed him from head to foot. He recovered himself, and swept the water from his face. And then a strange, hoarse laugh, defiant, a challenge flung to the elements, to his fellow men, and almost to his God, burst from his lips. He was not only accused of the murder of Tom Murchison—that was not enough—he was accused of *this!* His free hand with knotted fist swept out around him—he was accused even of the ill-fortune that had come upon this scuttling hulk which in a few hours would probably be where she should have been a dozen years ago—rotting whatever there was left of her still unrotted at the bottom of the sea!

It was the crew, of course. They were an ugly and unlovely lot—what was left of them. All natives. Mostly Lascars. Yar Lal, the mate, was a native of Bombay. But they suited Captain Josephus Mumm, who was a trader of fortune, an itinerant wanderer, picking at best a scanty living from whatever came his way, for they were cheaply housed, cheaply fed, and magnificently indifferent to the haphazard movements of the *Break O'Dawn.* They were vengeful by nature, steeped in the grossest ignorance, fanatical in their superstitions, and they blamed him, Peter, now for

their present misfortunes. He was not sure but that Captain Mumm, who, like every sailor, did not himself lack superstition, was beginning to side with them. He, Peter Blake, was a murderer—unclean. He, therefore, must be the cause of the ill-luck that, from the moment he had come aboard, had heaped itself day after day both upon the crew and the *Break O'Dawn* herself.

One disaster after another—an unending succession of them! Peter's face hardened. Oh, yes—that was quite true. So true that, to-night, little less than a miracle would avail them anything!

His mind harked back in retrospect. He had come aboard, of course, a very sick man, scarcely able to walk, and there had been no thought of confining him as a prisoner; then, little by little, he had got about, and had even begun to take a small part in the work aboard the schooner. He had messed and lived with Captain Josephus Mumm in the little cabin. Captain Mumm had been neither friendly nor unfriendly. Once, and once only, he, Peter, had attempted to discuss his own case with the other. Captain Josephus Mumm had dismissed the matter peremptorily. "That's all right, my lad," he had grunted with finality. "Mabbe you murdered Tom Murchison and mabbe you didn't. It ain't for me to say. That ain't my hunt. The point is that you're Peter Blake, and there's five thousand pounds for the man that hands you over to the police—and Captain Josephus Mumm is the man that's going to do it, if hell freezes over. And that's that!"

From the first the weather had grown worse and worse; and as though a pitiless, immutable fate was at work, one disaster had followed another, until, through constant repetition, fear and panic stalked aboard

the ill-fated schooner. On the third day after leaving the island, the *Break O'Dawn's* fore top-hamper went by the board; the next day one of the crew followed the top-hamper; twenty-four hours later one of the two boats was stove in; the following day the main-mast went, killing a man; and then——

Peter laughed out mirthlessly again. They blamed him for this! At first, apart from eyeing him with curiosity, they had been indifferent to his presence, then they had begun to show sullen aversion, which had later broken out into muttered discontent; and then, fanned into flame by Yar Lal, the mate, the situation had climaxed that afternoon with open threats, and a refusal, desperate as their need of added man power had been at the moment, to pull a rope with him—for that afternoon, Durga, the man who had accompanied Captain Mumm and Yar Lal into the hut where he, Peter, had been found, had been struck down by some falling tackle, and now lay somewhere up forward there in the fo'c'sle with what was probably a fractured skull. And that, too, was the result of the unclean thing—God save the mark!—that was amongst them!

Well, what did it matter? To-night would probably see the end of it for everybody aboard. They'd curse him as they died, of course! There was something grimly humorous in that—stupendously futile. What did it all matter? He was in a rotten mess anyway—a beastly mess. Tom Murchison! He had murdered Tom Murchison. His hand clenched fiercely. Yes, *that* mattered! He would have liked to live to pay his account for that with—*somebody*. Not likely now!

He gripped tenaciously at his hold as another ugly sea curled aboard and set the deck deep awash. The

Break O'Dawn! Who named her that? What a fund of irony! She wasn't likely to see any break of dawn to-morrow! She had lifted to that last sea, was lifting now to another, in a pitifully listless way —like some human bit of wreckage that, worn out at last after a long and bitter struggle, was slipping into that final stage of coma just preceding dissolution.

Oh, yes, they'd probably curse him as they died! If ever he had read hate in the eyes of men, he had read it in the eyes of Yar Lal, and those of the others who were left of the crew—five, counting Yar Lal and that poor devil with the smashed head—five out of seven! His laugh rang short and mirthless once more. Well, he wouldn't die with any added pangs on that score! Their curses ended here, or would end here, with the howl of the wind and the rush of the sea. The other thing was the worst—*Peter Blake murdered Tom Murchison.* That would last—endure. Good old head, after all, Sir Martin Hadley—old school, of course, but a decent chap. He could see Sir Martin's stunned, white face. A lot of beastly gossip, too, in the clubs. Rough on the old pater's friends. And then *she'd* know—no, thank God, she wouldn't! She didn't know he was Peter Blake. Strange, he should be so sure she had not long ago forgotten a face that she had seen but once in all her life, and then but for an instant. But he *was* sure. She had not forgotten; she would never forget—not that it had at all necessarily remained with her as some great, vital moment in her life as it had with him; it might perhaps have left with her no more impression than that of a lingering wonder, but it was impossible that she could forget. He knew that—as sometimes one knows the truth of things in

one's inmost soul. He knew that, so long as she lived, if only at odd, unexpected moments, with long intervals between, and longer as the years went by, no doubt, and perhaps at the end as no more than a vague, unreal memory, that meeting in the lobby of the theater in London, two years ago now, would still remain with her.

Strange! Very strange! He had been very sure too, always sure, as though it were inevitable, that, at the turning of some corner, as it were, he and she would meet again. He had been sure of this up till now, so sure of it that, since his "arrest" it had been a source of horror to him. He had dreaded it more than anything else connected with the miserable accusation against him, more than any penalty that, failing to prove his innocence, might be meted out to him. Again and again he had pictured the scene, dreamed it in his dreams—last night he had started up out of his sleep with the vividness of it bringing the sweat beads out in great drops upon his forehead. Where else under the circumstances could they meet? He was standing in the dock arraigned on a charge of murder—and she was sitting there a spectator in the courtroom. It was absurd, fantastical! Why should she be in a courtroom, anyway? And, besides, the width of the world lay between them. Nevertheless the thought, a product of his own unwarranted imagination though it might be, had persisted and had become a wretched obsession with him. Well, that was all at an end to-night. There wouldn't be any courtroom; there wouldn't be any arraignment of Peter Blake for the murder of Tom Murchison—except as it lived, an unanswered, untried charge in the minds of men until some newer sensation took its place and it faded away into the limbo of oblivion. He gave the

Break O'Dawn, and Yar Lal with his ugly lot, and Captain Josephus Mumm with his gargoyle face, and himself, Peter Blake, with his memories and his unsavory notoriety, a matter of hours—no more than that at most, and——

A startled, half smothered cry came suddenly from his lips, and instinctively Peter flung himself back against the schooner's rail. It had come out of the night, out of the darkness without warning—come and gone with incredible swiftness. Something had touched his cheek—like a bat brushing its wing across his face. Imagination? A wisp of spray errant from its fellows? Peter brushed his hand across his face. It was wet. Naturally, it was wet! A flash of lightning made momentary daylight. Peter was staring at his hand. There was something *red* on it. His eyes lifted, and before the flash was swallowed up in the darkness again, his glance fell on a long-bladed knife a few feet beyond him, its point embedded in the deck, its haft still quivering like a tuning-fork.

Peter's face was set in hard, chiselled lines. So it had come to this, had it? He strained his eyes forward. He could see nothing but the figure faintly outlined by the binnacle lamps. It was impossible from their relative positions, taking into account the location of the knife where it had struck the deck, that the man at the wheel could have thrown it. So, though he was nowhere to be seen in the darkness, it must have been Yar Lal, the mate! There was nobody else on deck. The mate had the watch—if it could be called a watch. Captain Mumm was below drunk with sleep and exhaustion—so, too, probably, were the two others who remained of the crew, not counting the man with the broken head.

Peter groped for a moment in the darkness, and

found the knife. Then, watching his chance against the seas and the schooner's lurch, he gained the companionway, and descended the short ladder-like steps to the cabin.

The place was stuffy, hot, unwholesome. It was a miserable hole at best, too small at any time for even a modicum of comfort. An oil-lamp, suspended from the ceiling, swung like a distracted pendulum over the squat, bare table, and at times in the violence of its motion smoked a little. Stretched out on a locker, that likewise did duty for table seats, lay Captain Josephus Mumm asleep. The man hadn't a dry rag on him, and in the confined, unventilated space he steamed. Peter's face lost some of its own grimness as he stared at the other. The man had flung himself down there obviously indifferent and too worn out to care about the greater ease his bunk in the so-called stateroom, just off the forward end of the cabin, might have afforded him; and his face now, even in repose, was haggard and pinched, and, with his mouth wide open and the red hair, tangled and matted, straggling over his forehead, he was an ungracious sight—but Peter, though he had no reason to love the other, was conscious now of a sudden sense of mingled pity and admiration. He did not know how many hours on end in the last ten days the man had gone without sleep and done the work of two men besides, but very many of them, with very short intervals of rest in between. Captain Josephus Mumm had made a fine fight of it. There was nothing uncouth about the grit and courage the man had displayed.

Peter toyed with the knife in his hand. What was the use, after all? Better let the man sleep! What particular difference did it make whether it was now or an hour from now that the other was told about the

little affair that had just happened on deck—or ever, for that matter! The *Break O'Dawn* would go down before the night was out—and that would end everything effectually enough! And then Peter started suddenly. The shrewd little eyes of the man on the locker were wide open, staring at him. Out of what had apparently been profound slumber, and whether or not due to a life trained to alertness, Captain Josephus Mumm had become suddenly and intensely awake.

"Ha, you swine!" ejaculated Captain Josephus Mumm, jerking himself up swiftly on his elbow, his eyes riveted on the knife in Peter's hand. "Caught you just in time, did I? Going to play your Tom Murchison tricks on me, were you?" He sprang to his feet, his face in fury. "Well, I'll show you!"

Peter put the table between them. There was something grimly ironical in the unexpected turn of events —and Captain Josephus Mumm in a passion was quite capable of anything!

"*You* haven't got any pearls, have you?" Peter inquired coolly. "Why should I want to murder you?"

"What're you doing with that knife then, and where'd you get it?" retorted Captain Mumm fiercely.

"It's merely 'Exhibit A' in the case," answered Peter quietly. He tossed the knife on the table. "I'm not positive, but I have a very good idea it belongs to that sweet-dispositioned devil of a mate of yours, Yar Lal."

Captain Mumm stared. His eyes narrowed in a puzzled way.

"What d'you mean?" he grunted.

"It was flung at me up there on deck a few moments

ago," said Peter. "Fairly well aimed, too, considering the distance. It grazed my cheek, and landed with its point buried about half an inch in the deck." He smiled faintly. "I doubt the intention, but perhaps it would have been a kindly act after all—I dare say it would have been easier to have gone out like that, than to scuttle with the *Break O'Dawn* a few hours from now."

"What's that you say? Scuttle?" roared Captain Mumm. He leaned across the table, and thumped both fists upon it. The matter of Yar Lal and the knife appeared for the moment to have passed entirely from his mind. "Who says she'll scuttle?" he roared again. "I'll have no talk like that aboard! D'you hear! I'll fight her through yet, d'you understand? She ain't going to scuttle, you hear me?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders. There was something likeable about the little red-haired man. He wondered if the other had even a meager hope, or if it was wholly pure grit.

"I'm not seaman enough to answer you," he said.

"Well, I'm seaman enough to tell you!" snapped Captain Mumm. "The only thing that's going down, by God, is the sea—not the *Break O'Dawn!* By tomorrow the tail end of it'll have passed."

Peter made no answer.

Captain Mumm sniffed angrily.

"Now, what about that knife? You say Yar Lal heaved it at you?"

"Or one of the others," amended Peter. "I'm not prepared to say which."

"Humph!" exclaimed Captain Mumm roughly. "Well, you know why! And I ain't altogether sure I don't side with 'em. Of all the scrougy luck that ever I've had since I went to sea, I've had the worst

since you came aboard here. They've made up their minds that you, being taboo with the blood of a man on your hands, are at the bottom of it, and, damme, I ain't prepared to say but it begins to look uncommonly like it."

"I assure you," said Peter shortly, "that I did not come aboard through choice; and, if I remember correctly, your idea of 'luck' on that occasion was quite different from the view you appear to hold now."

Captain Josephus Mumm scowled fiercely.

"You keep a civil tongue in your head, blast you!" he snarled. "You ought to have a knife heaved at you on any account, a dozen of 'em, and I——"

Captain Josephus Mumm paused suddenly.

Peter, a hard smile tightening his lips, straightened up tensely.

A figure, a strangely grotesque figure, was descending the companionway to the cabin. Yar Lal! The man had on a pair of duck trousers that clung wetly to a pair of skinny legs; a thin shirt, equally as wet and torn in a dozen places, covered the upper portion of his body; a mass of dripping hair hung over a lean, brown, working face, and out of it, as though peering out from behind some treacherous ambuscade, glittered a pair of black eyes as venomous as a serpent's.

"Well, what the devil do you want?" bellowed Captain Mumm. "Are you not man enough to carry on for an hour so that I can get a little rest?"

Yar Lal made an obeisance.

"What it is in the power of man to do, that have I done, O master; and it is very ill with the ship, but even so it was when the sahib left her in my care."

"Well, then?" prompted Captain Mumm ungraciously.

"Sahib"—Yar Lal's voice grated harshly—"a little while ago, Mir Dass came to tell me that Durga was dead, and I went and looked, and it was even so. And the toll is now three."

"Ah!" ejaculated Captain Mumm sharply. "Dead, is he? Well, there was no hope for him. And the toll is now three—eh? And so you tried to knife Blake here to make it four—is that it?"

"Sahib," said Yar Lal, his eyes smoldering, and fixed on Peter now, "it is in the mind of Putab Singh, and Selim Dey, and Mir Dass, who is kinsman to Durga, and also it is in my mind, sahib, that it is an ill thing that all should die, and Mumm Sahib likewise with the rest, because that which is an offense to Allah should remain amongst us. By the law he who has killed must sooner or later die. Let him die now, therefore, lest he bring more evil upon us, and we all perish before the night is done."

Captain Josephus Mumm scowled meditatively for a moment at Yar Lal.

"Think he's at the bottom of it, do you?" he grunted. "Ain't changed your minds any, I take it! And with another one of you cashing in it's put the business in the certainty class. That's your argument, ain't it?"

"Sahib," said Yar Lal passionately, "as Allah lives we are sure. The man is accursed—and the curse has fallen upon us all. Give him to us, sahib—and so even the law to which the sahib journeys with him will be fulfilled."

The scowl on the little red-haired man's face grew deeper.

"I am not the law," he growled. "And *I* am no murderer, Yar Lal!"

"His blood shall be on our heads, sahib," Yar

Lal answered swiftly. "And no man shall know what has come to pass—for even as it was with Wajib Abdur and Chunder Kheyl, who were swept overboard in the storm, so shall it be reported of this man."

Captain Mumm tweaked at his beard, eyeing through lids that were narrowed to slits now, first one and then the other of the two men in the cabin with him. A sea, thundering aboard, struck the vessel as though with the blow of some mighty hammer, and the *Break O'Dawn* quivered fore and aft like a stricken thing. The lamp swung a furious arc, flickered, emitted a puff of black, evil-smelling smoke, almost went out, then burned on again. A rush of water swirled along the deck overhead, hissed like a mill-race—and poured away through the scupper ports.

"God!" whispered Captain Josephus Mumm. Then in a growl again: "And what if I refuse, Yar Lal?"

"Then, sahib," said Yar Lal, and a gleam of white teeth showed in a narrow smile, "we will still do with him even as I have said."

"Mutiny!" said Captain Josephus Mumm in a curiously judicial way. "Y'understand that, don't you? 'Twould be mutiny!"

"It is in our minds," said Yar Lal, with an ugly monotony in his voice, "that it is better to mutiny than that we should die."

Captain Mumm leaned suddenly across the table toward Peter.

"D'you hear, Blake?" he said gruffly.

"I hear," said Peter.

"Well, what am I to say?"

Peter eyed the other for an instant and could

read nothing save a sort of gathering, unfriendly fury on the other's countenance. His glance travelled to the motionless figure of Yar Lal. The man looked more like a beast than a human being—the eyes were strangely hot, as though reason had fled from them.

"What you damned please," said Peter quietly—and, reaching out suddenly, possessed himself of the knife that, a little while before, he had flung upon the table.

A silence fell for an instant in the cabin; then Captain Mumm took a step forward—toward Yar Lal.

"Mutiny, would you! And make a murderer out of me, would you!" he roared. "You try any of your dirty games on Captain Josephus Mumm, and I'll teach you what's o'clock!" He took another step forward, shaking a clenched fist. "Get out of here, damn you! Get back to the deck, you dog, where you belong!"

Yar Lal retreated slowly up the companionway.

"The sahib uses hard words," he snarled.

"Aye!" bellowed the little red-haired man. "And I'll use harder—you scum of the pest-holes of Asia! I'll——"

A laugh, ugly, discordant, sinister, came from Yar Lal's tight lips.

"Sahib," he said, "in my country there is a saying that he who rides a tiger cannot dismount. Let it be so then, sahib. I go."

The companionway was empty. Yar Lal had vanished.

For the fraction of a second Captain Mumm stood staring up the companionway; then he turned, and with a jump, quick and agile as a cat's, reached the after end of the cabin, and, unlocking a small cupboard, wrenched the door open.

Peter moved impulsively toward the red-haired skipper.

"Look here," he said, "this is rather decent of you, for if I'm any judge of a Satanic mug that chap's got one, and——"

"Shut your jaw!" bawled Captain Mumm furiously. He whirled around with two revolvers in his hands—and pushed one across the table to Peter. "Are you going to teach me what that snaky lot 'll do when they run amuck? Not Captain Mumm—who's lived among 'em, boy and man, for forty years! They'll be on us as soon as that blasted mate can carry the tale to the fo'c'sle, and it's us or them now, and that's all there is to it."

"It's all the more decent of you, then," said Peter earnestly, "if you think it's as bad as that."

"Hell!" snorted Captain Josephus Mumm. "D'you think it's on your account? D'you think I'd lift a finger for you, you swine? No blasted fear! I ain't fighting for you—I'm fighting for that five thousand pounds! Aye, and"—he laughed raucously—"so 'll you too, unless you want to go overboard with a knife in you! Come on now—quick! If they trap us down here, we're gone!"

Peter had no opportunity to reply—the red-haired man with the gargoyle face was already halfway to the deck. But he was not sure that he would have made a reply anyway. No earthly use! He was conscious merely of a certain grim and mocking sense of irony pervading everything aboard the *Break O'Dawn*. Fate was having a bit of a laugh. It made him think of a herd of cattle on the way to the slaughter—that fought among themselves for standing room in the pens! An interesting prelude!

A tumbling sea drenched him as he reached the

deck; an iron grip on his arm saved him from being carried off his feet. Captain Mumm screamed in his ear over the howl of the wind:

"Don't waste none of your ammunition, y'understand? When you shoot—shoot straight! Now, stick close, and follow me."

It was utterly black. Peter could just make out the little skipper's form ahead of him, as, a yard behind the other, he ran staggering and lurching along the pitching deck in the direction of that glimmer of light at the binnacle and the shadowy form at the wheel. Whether the man there heard them or not, Peter did not know, but an instant later Captain Mumm's revolver was clapped against the Lascar's head.

"Search him!" shouted Captain Mumm. "And keep an eye for'ard!"

Peter went swiftly through the man's clothes, possessed himself of a long keen-bladed knife, and, as he searched, heard Captain Mumm snarling at the other, but in the storm could only catch snatches of what was said. The Lascar had no other weapon but the knife. Peter strained his eyes forward. He could make out the stump of the foremast, and, beyond, everywhere, wild, rearing crests of waves—nothing else. Another sea swept the deck—swept by him knee high. A lightning flash split through the black.

"There they come!" Peter cried. "They're tumbling up out of the forepeak!"

Captain Mumm's voice boomed out over the storm.

"You leave that wheel," he warned the Lascar, "and I'll come back and drop you if it's the last thing I do!"

A tiny spurt of flame came out of the darkness forward; and, faintly, down with the wind came the echo of a report.

"Armed!" boomed Captain Mumm again. "One of 'em is, anyway! That devil Yar Lal's the one—sneaked a revolver aboard some time or other, did he! Come on—work for'ard! Fire at the next flash. Drive 'em back. There's only three of 'em and a dead man with a broken head!"

Peter laughed in a low, grim way, as, with the red-haired skipper beside him, he began to make his way along the crazy, heaving deck. Why shouldn't he laugh? All hell, itself, must be screaming with delight! Blindman's-buff on a scuttling ship! They were all mad—himself, the skipper, and those men out there with the murder lust upon them. Nevertheless he would like to settle accounts with Yar Lal! Let the afterwards take care of itself!

The spurt of flame came again from forward—to port. Captain Mumm fired instantly in return; but Peter fired a little in the other direction. He could have sworn that even in the darkness he had seen something white move a half dozen yards away by the starboard rail.

"They've separated!" he called to the skipper. "There's one of them anyway over there to starboard."

"Go on, then!" yelled Captain Mumm. "Drive 'em back! Let 'em have it! I'll look out for the port side!"

Once more Peter fired. It might be imagination, but he thought he heard an answering scream. Curse the infernal deck! It was worse than grease. He made a yard. Water, knee high again, came with a rush over the rail. The *Break O'Dawn* lurched at a perilous angle. Peter went to his knees, clawing with the finger nails of his free hand for a hold. The shipped sea roared away to the lee rail—and

Peter fired again—and, crawling now, went on another yard, and another. Captain Mumm was no longer beside him. He did not know where Captain Mumm was.

And then the lightning, stabbing through the black, brought lurid daylight to the deck again. It seemed to last no longer than it would take to wink an eye, but in that moment everything aboard the *Break O'Dawn* stood out in sharp, almost exaggerated relief against the night. Five yards ahead two forms crouched by the rail; over to port, but wide apart, were two other forms engaged in an exchange of pistol shots—one of the crew, Yar Lal probably, and Captain Mumm, whose red hair looked ridiculously like a flaming torch in the unnatural light.

A knife hurtled through the air toward Peter from one of the two figures in front of him at the rail—and Peter held his breath, and ducked—and fired. This time, out of the blackness that seemed to have settled down upon the schooner deeper than before, an unmistakable cry of pain answered him. One was wounded, then! How badly, Peter did not know. But they had evidently had enough of it, for he could see them now—like two wavering shapes in the darkness—making for the fore part of the schooner. Peter smiled grimly—and followed at a run. Not very badly wounded at all events from the speed they made! Well, he was rather glad of that—provided the fight was out of them! Poor devils, after all!

He was close enough now to see them dive wildly for shelter into the forepeak, and, an instant later, reaching the spot where they had disappeared, he stood there clinging, against the pitch and heave of the schooner, to the sort of raised and sliding hatchway that made the entrance to the fo'c'sle.

"No good shouting at them to stay there or take the consequences," Peter muttered. "Put the fear of God into them with another shot!" He pointed his revolver at the deck, and pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked on an exploded shell. Empty! Peter clubbed the revolver. Oh, well, they wouldn't get out again anyhow!

He tried to pierce the darkness with his eyes. Where was Captain Mumm? There wasn't any more firing over there to port.

From below, muffled, there ascended a furious chatter; and suddenly at his elbow there sounded another voice, and out of the blackness loomed two figures. Close to him now, he could see that Captain Mumm had the native mate by the scruff of the neck —and the next instant the latter's form went tumbling headlong down the hatchway.

"Get in there, you scum!" roared the skipper's voice. "I'll teach you what mutiny means on the high seas, you misbegotten son of Belial!" Then, with a vicious laugh: "Where's your two, Blake? Give you the slip?"

"They're down there," Peter answered shortly.

"Humph!" grunted the other, and the vicious laugh came again. "Well, I fancy you've saved your neck, then—for the time being; and I've saved my five thousand quid! Now, we'll batten 'em in, and then get that other blighter at the wheel." He closed the hatchway and fastened it. "Come on, now!" he ordered curtly.

Peter, twice sprawling on all fours, and once clinging for his life to a bit of cordage, followed the other back across the deck.

Captain Josephus Mumm was there before him—with his revolver again at the Lascar's head.

"You take that wheel, Blake," bawled the skipper in Peter's ear. "And keep her the way she is! Understand?"

Peter nodded, and took the wheel.

"Now then, you scrapings from the pit!" Captain Mumm prodded the Lascar with the revolver muzzle. "You can come along for'ard with me, and I'll lock you up with your monkey mates—and, damn you, shake a leg!"

The two vanished in the darkness. Presently the skipper came back.

"And now," snapped Captain Josephus Mumm, "where's that revolver I lent you?"

Peter stared at the other.

"In my pocket," he said.

"Well, I'll thank you to hand it over!" said Captain Mumm roughly.

Peter handed it over.

"Quite right!" he said coolly. "I'll probably keep afloat a few minutes longer without the added weight. Ounces count at the last, you know. How long do you give us? Another couple of hours?"

"Blast you!" roared the skipper. "None of your lip! Don't think because you had to take a hand with a lot of murdering spawn that are no worse than yourself, that you don't stand just where you did before, except that you're the crew now, and you're going to stick it out."

"Quite right!" said Peter again. "I'd hate to see you lose that money!"

"You won't!" retorted the red-haired skipper fiercely. "I'd sail the *Break O' Dawn* through hell for that, and I'll bring her through this or my name ain't Captain Josephus Mumm!" He shook his fist in Peter's face. "Y'understand?"

A sea roared high, broke, and the tumbling weight of water came aboard and raced across the deck. It was waist high this time. Peter braced himself at the wheel, gripping with all his strength. With the swirl, Captain Mumm for the moment disappeared.

"*One* hour!" muttered Peter grimly from between clenched teeth.

The dripping face of Captain Mumm showed in the light of the binnacle lamp again—more like a gargoyle than ever.

"Y'understand?" shrilled Captain Josephus Mumm over the screaming of the wind. He shook his fist again.

"Of course!" said Peter, and smiled faintly. "Stick it—of course—rather!"

CHAPTER VII

LOOSE THREADS

THE *Isis*, owned by Mr. Humphrey Garth, was a vessel of some three thousand tons; she was roomy, comfortable, luxurious; she had a powerful wireless and even a broadcasting radio set; she had a swimming pool, which, if small, was charmingly and exquisitely designed; she had an elevator for her owner's convenience and the convenience of his guests; she had every innovation which naval architecture could suggest, even to her forecastle accommodations, where, cargo space being a detail with which she was not concerned, her crew was housed, so to speak, spaciously.

This was neither ostentation nor swank on the part of Mr. Humphrey Garth—it was merely typical. Once Mr. Garth decided to possess a yacht, it must be utilitarian to the last degree of service of which yachts were capable—whether for pleasure or convenience. It possessed exactly the same status on these grounds as his motor car. He sometimes motored for pleasure; he always motored from his suburban home to business. So with his yacht—he sometimes, very frequently indeed, indulged in pleasure cruises; he always, when business called him to London, or elsewhere that necessitated a sea voyage, gave his sailing orders to Captain Stone in as quite a matter-of-fact way as he would have given his chauffeur directions to drive him to a certain number in Pitt Street, and the *Isis* took him to his destination.

It was expensive—very. But Mr. Garth was an

exceedingly rich man. He could afford it, without a thought to the pounds, shillings and pence involved —otherwise it would have been the nature of Mr. Garth to have had nothing whatever to do with a yacht of any description, or, for that matter, anything else pertaining to his mode of living that his very shrewd business mind held as being at all questionable from the standpoint of sound financial propriety.

Ordinarily, Mr. Garth was extremely fond of cruising. On the present occasion, however, he had reached that state of mind where he was not at all sure but that he was subjecting himself to a disagreeable ordeal rather than treating himself to a period of enhanced enjoyment. On the evening of the sixth day out from Sydney—it was after dinner—Mr. Garth was standing at the head of the main companionway, and gazing somewhat moodily at the little baize covered notice board on which was displayed, together with the radio and wireless news items, the daily chart defining the yacht's position, posted at noon every day, and embracing, besides her exact latitude and longitude, a record of the miles she had made during the previous twenty-four hours, her course, her average speed in knots per hour, the direction of the wind, and a terse nautical comment on the weather.

His brows contracted dubiously. At the expiration of six days they were still not "around the corner" of the northern coast of Australia. Not that Mr. Garth was in a hurry—it merely evidenced very eloquently the persistent vileness of the weather. The *Isis* was fast and splendidly seaworthy—but no vessel could make a showing against a never-ending succession of gales and a continuously heavy and head sea.

Mr. Garth dug his hands into the pockets of his

dinner jacket, twisted his cigar with a corkscrew motion of his lips from one side of his mouth to the other—and then suddenly, removing the cigar, he whistled an air with the obvious idea of keeping his spirits up, though the effort was performed somewhat lugubriously. A moment later, however, he brought his own musical efforts abruptly to an end to listen to those of another. From the lounge, very low, restrained, subdued, came a remarkable tenor voice.

"The singing steward!" grunted Mr. Humphrey Garth.

He frowned. It wouldn't do, of course! Not in there! The fellow was setting out the bridge table, and naturally enough thought everybody was out on deck for a breath of air, now that the sea was down for about the first time, and no more than a beastly fog to make things uncomfortable. Still, it wouldn't do! That was the fellow's one fault—everlastingly at it, morning, noon and night—humming or singing. Marvellous voice, though—marvellous! He, Humphrey Garth, was always torn between the decision of kicking the fellow forward into the forecastle and keeping him there—or spending a few thousand pounds in seeing what could be done in the way of training the chap's voice.

Mr. Garth sucked on his cigar. The man was an East Indian, whose name was Lahat Khan. An excellent steward, though—better by a long way than Roberts, who, up to this trip, had filled the berth ever since the *Isis* had been in commission. Roberts had got a better job. Small blame to Roberts. Mr. Garth was glad of it. It was up to a man to get along if he could. Lahat Khan had applied with unimpeachable references; and the man spoke English perfectly, due, as Lahat Khan himself had explained, to having

been brought up from boyhood in a British Residency in some—Mr. Garth did not remember the name—benighted place somewhere.

The voice reached a high note, and, subdued and restrained as it was, struck it clear and true as a silver bell.

"Lahat Khan!" called Mr. Garth peremptorily.

The man appeared—trim and immaculate in his steward's uniform. He was a dapper little black-haired fellow, his skin very light in color—a good-looking young chap. He smiled disarmingly—not broadly. The smile was eloquent. It said: "Any service that I can be to you, sir, will be a pleasure."

"H'm!" said Mr. Garth—and cleared his throat. "Er—bring me a coat, Lahat Khan, I think I'll take a turn on deck."

"Instantly, sir," Lahat Khan answered. And instantly he was back and assisting Mr. Garth to don the garment. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said earnestly, "but I hope I didn't annoy you by singing in there. I thought everybody was out of hearing."

"H'm!" said Mr. Garth. "Yes—er—quite all right! I'm glad to know some one on board is keeping his spirits up."

Mr. Garth stepped out on deck. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the other had got the better of him—put him off his stroke, as it were. He should have reprimanded the man—of course. But a little bit of singing when the chap hadn't thought anybody was about—eh, what? It was a lot better than going around with a long face, as solemn as a funeral, and a sad, sheep's-eye expression, the way old Roberts had.

Mr. Garth paused just outside the companionway entrance. There was a gray blanket of fog, and, though the sea had gone down, still a heavy swell.

The *Isis* was rolling and pitching a lot, and occasionally still taking a sea over the fo'c'sle-head. It was far from a pleasant night—for a holiday cruise. Not particularly warm either for these latitudes—damp and sticky. Mr. Garth buttoned his coat, and looked up and down the deck.

Up forward in the lee of the captain's cabin under the bridge, he could just make out two dark objects. They were very close together. Owing to the distance and the obscurity, his eyes refused him any further information, but he knew what the objects were. They were two steamer chairs, and one was occupied by Marion and the other by Rand.

"There's half an hour yet before the bugle goes for the nightly bridge-fest," said Mr. Garth in a grimly facetious sort of a way to himself. "And meanwhile, I fancy, I'm not wanted *there*."

It struck him suddenly that he was a bit at loose ends. Perhaps, though, it was the night. He was a little out of sorts—that was it. Well, there was the bridge and Captain Stone up there in oilskins. Mr. Garth shook his head. Unpleasant! The fog was wet. No enjoyment in gripping at a dripping bridge-rail every time the vessel lurched. MacPherson, then? The chief engineer was a character in his way. Stubborn as Billy-be-damned! Once a notion got into that old Scotch head of his, one might as well try to move the Rock of Gibraltar as hope to shift MacPherson's mental moorings. Good engineer, though! He'd probably be in his cabin now yarning with Jaffray over a Scotch and soda. Jaffray, Mr. Garth knew, used to gravitate to the chief's cabin every night after dinner and stay there until it was time to play bridge.

He began to make his way aft along the deck.

Why the hell, did they all play bridge after dinner every night, as though it was some solemn and sacred rite that it would be anathema to forgo? He wasn't particularly keen on it; Jaffray *had* to play because he was a private secretary; and as for Marion and Rand——

Mr. Garth's brows came together in a pucker. He wasn't sure but that *they* were another cause for his uneasy and discontented mood to-night! Marion and Rand! They had been a lot together. Marion had not said anything—not a word—hadn't so much as given a hint whether she cared a fig for the man or not. But they had been a lot together. Some day, of course, Marion would marry. He wasn't fool enough to imagine that he was going to keep her always for himself—or that, when the time came, he was going to choose her husband for her. Marion had a mind of her own. A pretty sensible one, too! Damned level-headed, for that matter! He hadn't thought of Rand, though, in that connection when the trip had been suggested. He wondered why he hadn't. Probably it was because the man's life suggested anything but domesticity. The man was away for months in his jungle, chasing beetles and digging up age-old human skulls and all that sort of thing. Not a very practical sort of a man for a husband and home life. A brilliant fellow though—decidedly brilliant. But——

"Prehistoric eggs—my God!" ejaculated Mr. Garth with a sudden sense of uneasiness. "I don't know! I don't know!"

He descended the after companionway and headed along the alleyway toward the engineer's room. He was vaguely conscious that if the decision about making the trip were to be made over again, the *Isis* at

this moment would be in Sydney harbor instead of way up off the north end of Australia in weather that was dirty and depressing enough to give a man the everlasting blues.

He'd have a Scotch and soda with Jaffray and the incomparable Donald MacPherson. MacPherson with his stubbornness, and his "notions" that were all the old Scotchman's own, was at times exhilarating. A refractory mule had nothing on MacPherson!

The engineer's door was on the hook; and, as Mr. Garth approached, the Scotch burr rolled out. Mr. Garth stood suddenly stock-still in the alleyway.

"Mon," declared MacPherson's voice, "it's fair sinful! I dinna say it's not Mr. Garth's own money; but a man's no the right to spend it as he will for a' that. I've been brought up a Presbyterian, an' God-fearin', and I say it's sinful!"

"But, good Lord"—Jaffray's voice expostulated—"I don't see how you figure that out, chief. It's in the interests of justice, isn't it?"

"No!" snapped out the Presbyterian engineer, and there was a sound like the banging of a fist on a locker top. "It's more i' the interests of the devil! It's a temptation! It's an incentive to more crime. Who ever heard of the like?"

"Rats!" murmured Jaffray's voice.

"Rats, is it!" roared the Scotch engineer. "Young man, when I was your age, I'd no have the impertinence to say 'rats' to my elders, just because I'd no the experience or the brains to get the drift of what they were talking about!"

"Sorry, chief," said Jaffray, contritely. "But I'm hanged if I see where offering five thousand pounds' reward for a murderer is the unprincipled act you seem to think it is."

"Can ye no?" returned the engineer's voice heatedly. "I'll ask ye a question, then. An' it's a fair one. What would *you* do to get your hands on five thousand pounds? Five thousand, mind ye—'tis a hugeous sum!"

"Do?" Jaffray's voice was suddenly low and fervent. "I'd do a lot! Rather! Most anything but murder, I fancy. It would set the ordinary man up, of course, and that's the idea."

"Aye," said the engineer gruffly, "an' there's some as wouldn't stop at murder—more in these parts as wouldn't, than them as would. I tell ye no good'll come of it! Where was this Peter Blake last heard of? Where's he likely to be found? 'Tain't like it was in the heart of civilization. All the scum of the Islands and Malaysia'll be after that five thousand pounds."

"Of course, they will!" agreed Jaffray. "What do you suppose it was offered for?"

"And," said MacPherson sapiently, "if the blighter's ever found, he's the only one that stands a chance of not having his throat cut before he's landed in Sydney and turned over to the police. It's the one who finds him that'll be knifed by some one else who wants *his* chance at handing the murderer over and getting the reward—and there's no saying where that sort of thing would stop with the crowd that's to be found in this part of the world! I tell ye no good'll come of it, and, money though he may have, Mr. Garth has no the right to spend it without judicious thought to the consequences. Aye, an' ye can tell him so, too, wi' my compliments, if ye like."

"Tell him yourself," said Jaffray, with a short laugh. "Something whispers to me that I'm only hanging on to my own job by an eyelid, as it is. Lord,

I wish *I* had the blooming luck to cop that five thousand; and I'd hate to put the chance up to you, either, for all your——"

Mr. Garth retreated back along the alleyway.

"H'm!" confided Mr. Garth to himself. "I fancy I'm not wanted there, either!"

Mr. Garth pulled viciously on his cigar. His mood was in no degree mellowed. He was conscious now of a sense of pronounced irritability. MacPherson, of course, was a self-opinionated old ass. He, Humphrey Garth, was not at all clear in his mind as to what the engineer had been driving at, and he was not at all sure that the engineer knew, either. As for Jaffray—perhaps Jaffray wasn't so far wrong—about the job. Jaffray had his good qualities, but he was a bit—er—er—well, shallow—yes, say, shallow. "J. George Jaffray, Secretary to Mr. Garth." That's the way he signed the letters.

"Humph!" grunted Mr. Garth. And then, an instant later: "Well, the five thousand pounds hasn't done any harm so far—or any good, either. I've a damned good mind to make it ten!"

Mr. Garth reached the deck and pitched his cigar savagely overboard. He didn't want to play any bridge, or anything else, to-night. His mind was still further disturbed now with the thought of Tom Murchison. It was almost three weeks since he had offered the reward, and—Rand having returned from Auckland and the *Isis* having sailed a few days earlier than had been originally planned—five weeks, approximately, since "Daddy Tom" had been murdered. The reward had had unparalleled publicity. He had seen to that. It was known everywhere. But after three weeks it had brought no result. There was neither trace, nor word, nor sign of the man Blake.

From the night Blake had disappeared with Tom Murchison's boat and Tom Murchison's pearls, the fellow had become, so far as any clue to his whereabouts was concerned, literally non-existent.

"But I'll get him," said Mr. Garth from between suddenly clenched teeth. "Tom, old crony, I pledge you that! I'll get him, if it takes years and my last pound!"

Quite unconsciously, Mr. Garth had reached the forward end of the deck, and the two steamer chairs.

Rand at once rose courteously.

"Call for bridge, father?" cried Marion gayly.

"Eh?" said Mr. Garth, a little startled. "Er—no. I think I'll beg off to-night. Can't say I feel like it. Thought maybe I'd go up on top for a turn with Stone."

"But, father"—Marion had risen from her chair and had come to his side—"if it's thick enough and miserable enough weather to keep Captain Stone up there, it can hardly offer much in the way of attraction for you. I'm sure a rubber or two will be much more pleasant."

"Well, maybe, a little later on," replied Mr. Garth without enthusiasm.

Marion knew her father very well. She laid her hand quietly on his arm.

"What is it, father?" she asked quickly. "You're not ill, are you? Is anything the matter?"

Mr. Garth pinched his daughter's cheek playfully.

"No, my dear," he said; "I'm not ill, and there is nothing the matter. I'm just a bit out of sorts, I fancy—grumpy, you know. Not particularly good company. You don't mind, Rand—missing a rubber, I mean?"

"Not in the least," said Rand politely.

Marion, her brows knitted in an anxious little frown, watched her father make his way to the bridge ladder; then she returned to her chair.

Rand tucked the rug around her again, lingered a little longer than was necessary perhaps over the performance of that simple act of courtesy, and resumed his own chair.

"I noticed at dinner that father didn't seem just himself," Marion said, a slightly perturbed note in her voice. "I hope it is nothing more than the weather. It's been perfectly poisonous from the moment we left Sydney. Do you think it is *ever* going to clear?"

"Of course, it is," Rand answered, with a cheery laugh. "The glass has been rising steadily since noon, the sea has gone down, and there's only this bit of fog left. I shouldn't be surprised if we were complaining about a blazing hot sun to-morrow. Anyway"—he leaned slightly toward the chair beside him, and his voice was suddenly deeper—"I'm glad we're not playing bridge to-night."

Marion did not answer. She knew quite well what he meant. She did not pretend otherwise to herself. She was not blasé; she had never loved any one in her life, except her father, and Daddy Tom; it was not ego, or woman's vanity—but she knew that this man beside her here, either to-night or before she returned to Sydney, would ask her to marry him. She had known it almost from the day they had sailed. They had been a great deal together—constantly—too much perhaps. But—but that was to a very large extent the natural result of shipboard life. She had been, or had tried to be, just her normal self, neither encouraging nor avoiding him. But she had not been blind. His attentions had become more and more

pronounced in little things—a hundred little things.

And for herself?

Her heart was beating a little more quickly now. A sort of panic surged upon her, prompting her to make some excuse and go below, go to her father on the bridge—anything. It was not going to be easy to answer this man. If she could just put it off! But why? Would it be easier to-morrow or the next day—or the next? Would she know then, better than she did now, just what her feelings toward him were?

The *Isis* dipped to a sea. A great comber reared its head and thundered down over the forecastle-head. There was the rush of water along the foredeck, the hiss of it through the scupper ports, then the steady throb of the engines again—and the strange, silent fog.

Fog! Her mind was like that—in fog.

She liked him very much indeed at times, so much that at moments she had asked herself if it was not more than liking—if it was not love? And then, at other times, she did not like him at all. She did not know why. There was no reason—nothing tangible. No act, no word, no mannerism of his to account for this. It seemed absurd. Even empty-brained on her part.

It was quite dark here under the shelter of the bridge. She could just barely make out his features—but she found herself studying those features now. It had become a strange little habit of hers of late—when she could do so without embarrassment to either of them. Not a casual study of them as in the earlier stages of their acquaintanceship, but a study, quite a brazen sort of study, a study by contrast, as it were. Once she had seen a face in a crowd—a man's face. She had never seen it before, and she had

never seen it since. But she had never forgotten it, never could forget it. She could not describe even to herself her feelings when, in the lobby of that London theater, out of the surging, pushing, chattering, laughing press of people making for the exit, she had seen that face. It had not startled her, it had not even surprised her; it was as though she had *expected* to look up and see that face. And then it had brought a most strange sensation. It had seemed to awaken memories that were ages old; even the scene had seemed to be one that once, somewhere, out of a vague unreality, she had actually *lived* before. She hadn't, of course! That was utterly fanciful. But the impression had remained—had even grown stronger.

Why should she of late have acquired the habit of contrasting those two faces—the one of memory with Herman Rand's? The other face was not nearly so handsome as Rand's. The other was not even handsome in any degree; it was too rugged for that, too —too utterly masculine. She did not know any other way to express it. There was just something strong and tremendously clean about it, and a certain indomitable poise to it on its broad shoulders.

"Miss Garth"—Rand was suddenly bending over her, his voice low, a little shaken—"I—I did not mean to say anything to-night. Perhaps I shouldn't, but—but I feel that you know, and—and—well, I can't hold it back any longer. I think I cared for you from the first moment I met you. And, since then, these days on board here have brought me more happiness than I have ever known before. I know that you have given me no reason to believe that you, too, care, but I have dared to hope. Tell me," —his voice was very low now, vibrant—"have I—have I any right to hope?"

It had come. She sat there now staring, not at him, but out over the vessel's rail into nothingness. Her hands in her lap under the rug tightened together. How should she answer him? What should she say? Not whether it should be "yes" or "no." She realized quite clearly at this moment that her feelings for him had never passed beyond the stage of friendship. But how to answer him—and not hurt him? It brought her a pang, a sudden stab. Her eyes filled. She could understand: One who cared—and one who didn't!

"I am terribly sorry, Mr. Rand—terribly sorry." Her voice faltered a little in earnestness and emotion. "But—but I do not think I could ever feel toward you in that way. I—I want to be very honest with you. There are times when I like you—oh, tremendously. And, perhaps, though you say I haven't, I may have shown that liking more openly than I should, and—and have possibly given you some reason to believe that I returned your own feelings."

"No!" he said instantly. "You have never done that!"

"Wait!" she said. "I said I wanted to be very honest with you. If—if I always felt that liking, I—I do not know but that, after a while, I, too, might come to care. But there are times when there seems to be something—oh, I do not know how even to express it—something antagonistic between us."

"I do not understand," he said a little hoarsely.

"Nor do I," said Marion in a troubled way.

"Is it anything I have done? Anything I have said?" he asked quickly.

"No," Marion answered. "Nothing. I—I told you I could not explain it."

"But," he protested—and then suddenly he laughed

in a low, relieved way. "I think I know!" he said. "It's perfectly natural. The world would be all changed, your world, I mean, if you were about to be married; and however much you cared for one, unl ss you knew him very intimately indeed, the future could not help but hold a troubled questioning in your heart, and too, perhaps, a certain trepidation that at times would bring fear and hesitation. You have known me for only a little while, and I have spoken far too soon. I have been too impetuous. I should have waited. And that is the reason, I am sure, for what you call those moments of antagonism —which are not actually antagonistic at all."

"No," she said slowly; "I do not think so. If I loved any one, really loved in the way you mean, no matter how short a time I might have known him, I cannot imagine myself thinking of the future with anything but joy and eagerness."

"And yet," said Rand gravely, "I am sure that I am right. I want to believe I am, anyway. You must not rob me of that belief—of something to which I want to pin my faith—because I must have faith, and I must have hope."

Again Marion shook her head.

"Would it be fair not to rob you, as you put it?" she said earnestly.

Rand was silent for a moment.

"Fair!" he said at last, his voice a little husky. "Oh, I don't mind that! I must take my chance there. May I ask you a question—even though, perhaps, I have no right to ask it? Is—is there any one else?"

Marion was still staring out into the gray fog.

"No," she said steadily, "there is no one else."

"Then," said Rand, in a strangely quiet way, "I shall never give up until there is."

Marion closed her eyes. One who cared—and one who didn't! The ship's noises, a thousand little creakings, the pound of the bows into the seas, the slapping of a bit of cordage, the tramp of feet on the bridge overhead, all seemed extraneous things out of some life of which she had once been intimately a part, but from which she had suddenly become strangely detached. Her mind was in distress.

And then she heard him speaking again, but now his voice was entirely altered; it was casual, pleasantly conventional.

"I'd like to tell you about some rather interesting experiences we had on an expedition up in North Borneo a couple of years ago, if you'd care to have me," he said.

She looked at him quickly. This was one of the moments when she liked him—tremendously.

"Yes, do!" she said eagerly.

CHAPTER VIII

OUT OF THE GRAY WALL

THE *Break O' Dawn* had taken on a new lease of life. Forty-eight hours had brought a change. The sea was down. True, it was no night of beauty, but what were a few fog-banks and a still angry swell compared with what had recently brought the *Break O' Dawn* so perilously near her end!

Peter's eyes followed the figure of Captain Josephus Mumm, as, through the fog and murk, he could just make out the little red-haired skipper moving swiftly here and there about the deck. The man was making things "ship-shape"—had been all day. Queer devil of a chap! Ugly enough of face, the Lord knew, and ugly enough of temper, too—but with a ferocious grit about him, that one could not help but admit and admire.

The bits of torn and ragged canvas, that were still serviceable, were now doing all that they were capable of, and—still a source of dazed unreality to Peter—the *Break O' Dawn* was not only afloat, but, after a fashion, was making a few knots and actually steering a course, even if that course was somewhat problematical as to destination, since it depended entirely upon dead reckoning and with very little upon which to base even that decidedly questionable calculation. Peter eased the wheel a little, and smiled grimly. Even so, the red-haired little spit-fire of a man was in a fair way to earn his five thousand pounds!

A bit of an incongruous situation! The crew, the

four of them that were left, locked up in the forepeak; and he, Peter, helping to work the *Break O' Dawn* to port—that he might stand his trial on the charge of murder! The grim smile deepened. Captain Josephus Mumm carried two loaded revolvers in his pocket, and when he went below to snatch a short spell of rest, locked the cabin behind him. He, Peter, was not permitted to enter the cabin—the deck served for *his* spells of rest where an eye could be kept upon him whilst Captain Mumm must perforce take a trick at the wheel! Captain Mumm had expounded his policy and his line of action succinctly enough.

"I ain't taking any chance, y'understand!" Captain Mumm had stated, his tawny, bristling beard sticking out belligerently. "And having got that lot for'ard where they're feeding out of my hand, I ain't hankering for *knives* from any other source—not mentioning one I know of as is damned handy with 'em!"

Uncompromising little beggar! Five thousand pounds! Well, it was a lot of money—more than Captain Josephus Mumm had probably ever seen at one time, since the little red-haired skipper's maximum of worldly wealth up to the present had undoubtedly been measured by no more than a few precarious pickings earned in his haphazard wanderings, coupled, of course, with the possession of some down-at-the-heels, worm-eaten hulk such as the *Break O' Dawn*. Captain Josephus Mumm had his mind, soul, and body glued on that five thousand pounds. Peter shook his head in a strangely tolerant way. He didn't blame the man; certainly he held no rancor against the other for it. It meant virtual independence for a man of Captain Mumm's station—and the man wasn't young any more, to say the least of it. And the

evidence—Peter's hand went swiftly to his forehead, and brushed across his eyes. It was black enough. So black that——

What was he driving at? Oh, yes! A sort of bitter laughter came to his lips. So black that Captain Josephus Mumm was quite justified in delivering Peter Blake over to the authorities—entirely apart from the consideration of five thousand pounds. So black, with nothing to offset it in rebuttal, with only his own story, which, against the evidence, would not be believed, that his reason told him he was as good as condemned from the moment he put his foot in the dock.

Well—what?

Forty-eight hours ago this phase of the situation had apparently taken care of itself. He had expected and believed the *Break O' Dawn* would go down with all on board. He had believed it to have been but a matter of an hour or two; and, stubbornly as Captain Mumm had repudiated it, he, Peter, believed that the little red-haired skipper had expected it, too. But to-night it was different. Given moderate weather, the *Break O' Dawn* would limp into some port somewhere, refit, get another crew, and eventually make Sydney—or, for that matter, he, Peter, might be turned over to the police no matter where the schooner touched. Captain Josephus Mumm's five thousand pounds would be equally secure!

Peter's hands gripped tightly on the spokes of the wheel. What was he to do? He was conscious of an overwhelming sense of impotence. He was like a man bound hand and foot, on the crumbling edge of a precipice, powerless to move or help himself. No defense. Not a shred of evidence to bring forward in his own behalf. The pearls? Captain Mumm had

disposed of that point. Either he, Peter, had hidden them, or the natives—priceless things to the natives, pearls were!—had taken them. The jury would not leave the box!

Isolation! He was conscious of that, too. He stood alone. It would have helped to be able to talk it over, argue it, discuss it with some fellow human—even with some one who was antagonistic to him. He had tried again with Captain Mumm that morning. No go! The red-haired skipper had unbent so far as to fetch a pannikin of hot water and a razor on deck, and had permitted him to shave—but had been painstakingly careful to appropriate the razor again! Captain Josephus Mumm was not interested in that end of the matter at all—Captain Mumm was interested merely in the five thousand pounds.

As well attempt to argue with a stone image! The man argued about nothing. He merely clamped his mental jaws on an idea, like a dog with a bone, as it were, and prepared to fight all comers. One might get the bone away from him—but it would only be by battering the irascible and stony little man into insensibility. Witness the last forty-eight hours! The way he had handled those caged animals up there in the forepeak!

Peter smiled grimly. Yesterday they had buried Durga, the man with the broken head. A strange funeral—with Captain Mumm as chaplain, his robes of office a couple of revolvers, one in each hand. Yar Lal and Mir Dass had brought the man on deck, at the skipper's snarling command—the other two, attempting to follow, had had their prison door slammed in their faces until the obsequies were at an end. The body, thanks to the prodding revolvers in the ribs of Yar Lal and Mir Dass, had been hastily

committed to the deep, and, quite as promptly, the two pall bearers had been herded back into the forepeak again. Only one of the four had seen the light of day since then. Selim Dey, who proved to be the man that had been slightly wounded, and who was, therefore, the least likely of the lot to attempt to make trouble, had been permitted on deck at intervals to prepare the rations that Captain Mumm served out, and to carry water to his fellow prisoners.

Peter turned his head suddenly, cocking his ear against the wind. Was that a sound of some sort out there in the fog—or imagination? Imagination probably! Or perhaps the *Break O' Dawn* herself! The *Break O' Dawn* was making all sorts of queer noises—creakings and groanings and moanings, and, despite the skipper's efforts, loose tackle in squeaky blocks was constantly in evidence; and then, too, the *swash-swash* into the heavy swells.

And then, as, head turned, Peter stood listening intently, Captain Mumm spoke at his elbow.

"Thought you heard something out there, eh?" grunted the skipper.

"Yes," said Peter.

"Me, too," nodded the other. "What'd it sound like?"

"I don't know," Peter answered. "It was so indistinct that I'm not sure it was anything at all. If I had to give it a name, I'd say it was more like a rumbling than anything else."

"I'll put a better name to it than that," said Captain Mumm. "It's a fog siren. There's a ship out there. Listen! We'll get it again in a minute."

Peter listened. It seemed a long time—and then his ear caught a muffled and prolonged bellow that, thanks to Captain Mumm's explanation, he recog-

nized now as the hoarse booming note of a ship's whistle.

"A fast boat—and travelling like Gehenna!" snapped Captain Mumm. "Where'd you place it?"

Peter shook his head. One instant the sound had seemed to come from one quarter, and the next instant from another.

"I don't know," he said. "It seemed to go all around the compass. Wait for the next blast."

Captain Mumm pulled fiercely at his tawny beard.

"It did," he muttered; "and that's a fact. But she's coming up with us from somewhere—that's certain. It's thicker than a smoke screen out there—and not a blasted thing aboard to make a noise with that she'd hear."

Peter did not answer.

The blast came again, but only, it seemed to Peter's straining ears, after a great interval of time. It was much louder, and obviously, therefore, much nearer, but the acoustics of the fog were as tricky as ever. He could not definitely determine the direction of the sound.

"From the port quarter, I'd say," growled Captain Mumm; "but damme, I ain't sure. Here, give me the wheel, and get along up for'ard there! Quick now! She ain't a half mile off us. Keep your eyes skinned—and your ears too!"

"Right!" said Peter tersely—and running forward took up his station at the schooner's bow.

It was a bit eerie. He couldn't see anything. He clung to a jury stay, staring out into a gray, murky, impenetrable curtain of fog, steadying himself against the uneasy plunge of the *Break O' Dawn* as she buried her nose in the rolling swells. There was a ship out there—quite close. Peter acknowledged an un-

comfortable feeling. By all the laws of probabilities, of course, she would go by in the fog still unseen. Unseen! Yes, that was it. It was always the "unseen" that stirred the senses to undue emotion and alarm. It brought the imagination into play, and if one's imagination were at all nimble, one could picture no end of disturbing things. It was incredible, for instance, though it had happened since men sailed the seas, that two vessels, after days and leagues of voyaging, should come at the same instant to the same identical spot out of all the vast expanse of ocean —a spot that would be represented by no more than a mere pin-prick on their charts! There was a certain uncanny fascination in it, though—watching for some ghostly appearance out there that would not of course materialize. Half an hour from now, the mind would be occupied in wondering what ship it was, and whither bound, and just *how* close she had been. Queer he hadn't heard her siren again! Surely the regular interval must have lapsed, and——

A hideous mingling of sounds hammered at Peter's ear-drums—a yell of warning from the red-haired skipper at the wheel, the hoarse, raucous, ugly blast of a whistle, the vicious *slatting* of canvas, the screech of swinging booms as the *Break O' Dawn* in answer to her helm strove to swerve sharply from her course —but the sounds were only subconsciously existent in Peter's mind. Rigid, he stood there—braced. He could see now. It was as though that gray wall out there had been suddenly rent asunder by some vast, monstrous shape that came tearing ruthlessly through it straight for the amidships of the *Break O' Dawn.* It towered high—close aboard the schooner now—a demoniacal thing. And the *Break O' Dawn,* sodden, irresponsive, under her jury rig, was sluggish in her

movements and her answer to the helm. Eternity lived in the passing of a second.

There was a crash, the grind and crunch of impact; a shock that hurled Peter to his face upon the deck. Cordage, blocks, canvas, spars, came down in a rain around him. A bedlam of hoarse, wild shouts rang in his ears. He staggered to his feet, dazed a little. Something, he did not know what, some of the falling tackle probably, had hit him a glancing blow upon the head. He dashed his hand across his eyes, as though to clear both his physical and mental vision. It was a grotesque, fantastic sight! It looked as though a great plowshare of enormous height had embedded itself in the *Break O' Dawn's* side. The steamer's bow, of course! It seemed to have driven itself almost halfway through the schooner's amidships deck from port to starboard. And now it was beginning to retreat. It would leave a hole in shape like a huge slab of pie. The water was pouring in there now. He watched the rush of it, listened to the hungry roar of it. Tons of it! He wondered whether the *Break O' Dawn,* already almost cut in two, would break apart before she went down, or take her final plunge in one piece. Good Lord, what did it matter!

The voice of Captain Mumm, strident, shrill, rang out of chaos:

"Stand by! We're sinking!"

Just the wall of fog—the wide, gaping hole in the shattered hull—the schooner's ugly list. The steamer's bow had vanished. Like a wraith! But it seemed to Peter that he had heard an answering shout to the red-haired skipper's hail. He wasn't sure. He was listening to something else now—a queer thumping, pounding sound; and a chorus of cries, muffled,

indistinct, cries almost inaudible, but strangely frantic.

And then Peter's brain cleared in a flash, and he leaped across the deck. Yar Lal and the others were down there in the forepeak—trapped. They'd sink like rats in a cage.

Captain Mumm's voice came bawling from somewhere aft:

"Lend a hand here, Blake, to swing this boat out! And look lively. She's settling fast!"

The starboard boat—lucky *that* wasn't the one that had been smashed in the storm!

"Right!" Peter shouted back—and knocked the fastenings off the sliding hatchway.

The four men from below swept out upon him, heedless of him in their terror, fighting madly with each other as to who first should reach the open. They went screaming past him, making aft—Yar Lal leading. The boat, of course! They'd naturally make for the boat. He followed at their heels. A moment later he stood at the skipper's side among the maddened little crowd.

Six all told! The boat would hold all hands and plenty to spare if they could ever get her launched. The deck was listed at a perilous angle. The port rail was almost under. It was difficult even to preserve one's footing. The four men were pushing, shoving, snarling, screeching—frantic, fear-crazed. Captain Mumm roared his orders at them in a steady flow of profanity.

The davits swung out—somehow. But, with the list now, the boat did not quite clear the schooner's side; instead, slightly canted as it hung there, it scraped against the *Break O' Dawn's* hull.

The four natives made another rush for her.

Like a maddened bull the little red-haired skipper

drove them back—this time at the point of a revolver muzzle.

"Blast you!" he roared. "You'll have us all in kingdom come in a shake—and we ain't a blamed long way off it now! Blake, tumble into the boat there and man the for'ard tackle, and get ready to lower away. I'll take the after one. And you, you swine, when you get in, stand by to fend off as we pay out—and have a care!"

Peter swung himself over the rail into the bow of the boat, and manned the tackle falls as Captain Mumm clambered after him into the stern—and then, deaf in their terror to the skipper's threats and orders, and in an access of panic, perhaps because they feared that, as a final punishment, they were to be left behind, Peter saw the four natives come flinging themselves in a mad helter-skelter over the rail, fighting as before with each other as to which one should be first. One of them, and then another, fell heavily against him—and knocked the tackle from his hands.

There was a wild chorus of screams and a furious bellow from Captain Mumm that rose above all other sounds, as the bow dropped like a gallows trap—and Peter and Captain Mumm, with the four natives, were catapulted out of the boat and hurled downward into the water.

CHAPTER IX

THE RESCUE

PETER came to the surface, dashed the water out of his eyes, and stared about him. Here and there in the murk he saw a bobbing head. A heavy swell carried him along on its crest. Indistinctly, like a shadowy, ghostly shape he saw the *Break O' Dawn*. The schooner was well over on her side now, as though wallowing for her last plunge; and dangling down her hull, like a worm wriggling on a hook, the empty boat hung by its stern from the after davit.

Make for the *Break O' Dawn?* What was the good? She was liable to go down any minute, and the suction would take him with it. Better stick as near the immediate vicinity as he dared and trust to a bit of something floating free when she sank. Nothing to get fussed up about. He was a good swimmer—good for several hours, anyhow. The steamer that had run them down wouldn't go away after the skipper's hail. It had only been a few minutes ago—just about the time it would take her to back clear of the *Break O' Dawn* and make her preparations for rescue. The only fear was that she might lose the exact bearings in the fog.

A head bobbed up close to him, a red-thatched head—Captain Josephus Mumm!—the tawny beard pointed sharply, stiffly, upwards. Peter shouted at the other. There was no answer. Instead, the head went under. Queer! The man must have been hurt when he was flung out of the boat. He seemed helpless—drowning, in cold English.

Peter swam for the spot—dived without avail—and dived again. No go! And then a few yards off the head came up again—and this time Peter grabbed the other, and turning on his back, rested the little red-haired skipper's head on his chest.

"Hurt?" Peter coughed the water out of his nose and throat.

No more than an inarticulate, gurgling sound answered him.

"All right!" said Peter. "Steady does it! Just lie quiet. Don't move! Don't struggle!"

A strangling sound came from Captain Mumm—the expulsion of water from his lungs. Then the man's voice—gasping:

"You—Blake?"

"Yes," said Peter. "Where are you hurt?"

"Ain't hurt," Captain Mumm jerked out. "Can't swim."

"Can't swim!" This sounded suddenly very funny to Peter—as though the man were cracking a joke under absurdly and ironically apt conditions. He heard himself laugh! What a strange place to laugh! "Can't swim! Forty years at sea, and can't swim!"

"No, blast you!" snarled the little red-haired man furiously. "I can't swim! So let me go—you can't hold both of us up."

"Can for a bit," said Peter coolly.

"Let go!" snarled Captain Mumm again. "You're a bigger fool than I took you for! They'll have their boat out. Maybe they'll never find you—but you've got a chance. Let go of me!"

"No!" said Peter.

"Won't you?" growled Captain Mumm—and began to struggle madly to free himself.

Twice Peter went under, but came up with his grip still upon the other.

"You do that again," he choked savagely, "and I'll break your damned head!"

The little red-haired man made another wrench to free himself. Peter raised himself, freed his right arm from the water, and his fist swung with a crashing blow to the other's jaw.

Captain Josephus Mumm lay quiet on Peter's chest.

There was a strange ringing in Peter's ears—there had been for quite a little while. It was the water probably. He had been too much occupied with Captain Mumm to pay heed to anything else. He didn't know whether he had stunned the other or not—but the man was quiet at all events.

The ringing kept on—it came in steady throbs—a metallic clangor. Ah, he had it now! A ship's bell! That's what it was! It was being rung steadily —*clang, clang, clang, clang.* Out there! Where? He'd make toward it, if he could only place it, be sure of its direction. It was much better than blowing a siren. With a siren blowing they couldn't hear shouts for help. Why hadn't he shouted before? They'd lose their own boats likely enough in the fog if they got too far away, but they'd have them in the water ready for use. Perhaps that was it.

Peter began to shout with all his might. Again and again he shouted. He couldn't keep that up. It robbed him of his breath, stole the air from his lungs. At intervals, then! He waited for an instant and shouted again. It seemed to him that the clanging of the bell stopped, as though those on board were listening. Once more his voice rang out—but hoarser, weaker now.

He thought he heard a shout in answer—and the

next moment he was sure of it. It came distinctly, though it seemed to be a long way off.

Peter shouted grimly again. He must keep on shouting. It was a question of finding him in the fog —and that was the only way they could find him. Captain Mumm was becoming a weight—dragging him down a bit. Ought not to! But perhaps he, Peter, wasn't as fully convalescent as he had thought he was—not up to strength. The man was mumbling now—coming to. He must have dazed the little skipper with that smash on the jaw.

What was that?

The rattle of oars, wasn't it? A boat! Damn it, the man was getting heavy! The top of that swell went over both their heads. Just a matter of sticking it out, though—must be done!

"Cheer-O!" gasped Peter to the man on his chest. "There's a boat coming! Shout a bit, if you can."

Captain Mumm made a spluttering sound—then his voice cleared a little.

"Ahoy!" he screeched weakly. "Ahoy! Boat, ahoy!"

"Good!" cried Peter. "Now together! Ahoy! Ahoy!"

A hail came back—close now, clear, loud. And then a sharp, quick command:

"Easy all! There they are! Stop her way! You, there, Smithson—on the starboard bow—get hold of them!"

Peter felt a hand grasp the collar of his shirt—above him a boat's side, the faces of men, took form. The next instant he and the red-haired skipper were hauled aboard, and passed aft into the stern.

"Here," said a voice, "get some of this inside you —both of you! It'll put life into you."

Peter took a generous pull at the flask. He saw Captain Mumm do likewise.

The stimulant seemed to revive the little red-haired skipper completely, for he spoke now with sudden irascibility to the man who had supplied the flask, and who, Peter noted now, was in the uniform of a ship's officer.

"You cut me down, curse you!" snapped Captain Mumm.

"Yes," the officer answered. "Rotten luck! It's a bad business, I'm afraid. How many more were there of you?"

"Four," grunted Captain Mumm laconically. "Natives."

"We thought we heard some other cries besides yours," said the officer; "but we couldn't locate them —or your vessel, either."

"Seeing as how she's sunk you probably wouldn't!" Captain Mumm gave vent to fluent profanity—and lapsed into silence.

"I suppose we ought to get you two back on board, but it's that much less chance for the others if we take the time," said the boat's commander dubiously.

"Don't, then," said Peter quietly. "We're well enough off where we are."

"Right!" said the officer. "We'll carry on, then. Give way again, men! Pull easy, and keep hailing!"

As Peter reckoned time, perhaps half an hour passed. There was something weird, unearthly, about the whole scene—the men in the boat, like dark shadows, pulling at the oars, calling out hoarsely in turn as the boat circled around and around; the figure of Captain Mumm sitting opposite to him, sullen, silent, his hand to his jaw as though nursing it; the ship's bell somewhere, unseen, striking, striking, striking—but no

answering hail from the rolling swells and the water around them.

"I'm afraid it's no earthly use, so far as we are concerned," said the officer at last gravely. "I fancy the Old Man will stand by until morning, or until we get a lift in the fog, on the chance of any of them having got hold of something to cling to—though they'd have drifted a good distance in that case, of course. But once we could see we could steer around a bit. I think we'll go aboard now, anyhow, and report."

Captain Mumm, still nursing his jaw, said nothing.

Peter nodded his head.

"I think you're right," he said.

Another few minutes passed. The sound of the ship's bell grew clearer and clearer. Peter suddenly ran his hand through his dripping hair. Something of strange disquiet had been gradually creeping over him; it seemed to surge upon him now in full force. A bit of a mockery, this rescue! From what? To what? The answers to those questions were identical, weren't they? He wondered if he wouldn't have been better off if, like Yar Lal, or Selim Dey, or Mir Dass, or Putab Singh, the boat hadn't found him? He'd have to face some of his own kind now as a man with a price on his head. And now suddenly he shrank from that contact with an intense and bitter aversion —infinitely more, it seemed, than he had shrunk from it on the *Break O' Dawn*. It had seemed far off then —with only Captain Mumm. It was imminent now. His own kind! This officer, apparently a decent chap, sitting here beside him—he wouldn't sit so close, perhaps, if he knew! And in another few minutes now, less than that——

A yellowish glow loomed up out of the fog. Voices,

that knocked in a queerly extraneous way at the door of Peter's fevered mind, began to call out to the boat. A giant white shape towered above him. The boat bumped. High up at the head of the gangway there was a big flare light.

He followed Captain Mumm up the ladder. There was a group awaiting them on the deck—a number of men; and there was a woman amongst them. The red-haired skipper stepped down on the deck—and then, under the glare of the flare light, Peter stood suddenly stock-still. His hands clenched tightly. That slim, cloaked figure there! His eyes met hers over the skipper's head—held hers. And he stood there—looking—looking. His face had gone white; white as death—he sensed that. Somewhere in the world . . . around the next corner . . . ! It was long ago, years ago, and then for only a single moment, but it seemed now as though there had been no years, no time between, that it was the night in the lobby of that London theater again, and that their eyes were still holding each other, as though that gaze, one upon the other, had never lifted, never been broken.

And Peter's hands clenched tighter, and he stood there—looking—looking—looking——

It might have been a minute, or but a few seconds. Time had no measure for Peter. His heart was pounding, driving the blood in smashing blows through his veins. His whole being was vibrant with emotion. His soul was full of a glad, wondrous refrain. He had been right—a thousand times right! She did not know his name, nor he hers; but that meeting had never faded from her memory, and she knew *him*. He had known that it would be so—been sure of it. And he was right. The color came creeping gloriously

into her face; he saw her lips part slightly as though to utter a little cry, and then close again.

The boat's crew crowding up the gangway forced Peter to move. It was as though some one had struck him a sudden and brutally vicious blow. It brought him to a stark and naked sense of his surroundings. It aroused him to a new and cruelly different mental state. Mechanically he stepped down on the deck beside Captain Mumm. She was not looking at him now; her eyes had dropped to a study of the deck—but the color still held in her face. Peter's glance went swiftly around the circle. No one seemed to have noticed what had passed between that little cloaked figure and himself, except a dark, tall man who stood beside her, and who, after a swift glance at the girl, had fixed his eyes for an instant on him, Peter, with a strange, brooding scowl.

His kind! That had been his thought in the boat. And then—then for the little while that was just gone, that thought had been blotted out of his life, but it was back now. His kind! It had been bad enough in the boat, but he had not thought to find *her* here. She did not know his name, know who he was, know anything about him—but in a moment she would.

"Oh, God!" Peter's soul cried out in agony.

He did not want her to know. Every faculty he possessed rose up antagonistically in fierce and savage opposition. A thousand times better now that the boat had never picked him up! Peter Blake . . . for the murder of Tom Murchison . . . five thousand pounds' reward . . . ! What a ghastly travesty on that holy, sacred thing he had cherished in his heart: the thoughts, the memory of that face, the sure belief, proven now, that she, too, had never

forgotten! He did not want her to know, to stand there and listen while he was proclaimed—a murderer. But he could not prevent it. She would know in an instant. Captain Mumm was speaking now out of a chorus of voices that, Peter was conscious, had been going on all the time around him.

"Mumm's my name," said the little red-haired skipper with a truculent note in his voice. "Captain Josephus Mumm, master of the schooner *Break O' Dawn.* Aye, you've sunk her! What else? You cut her half in two."

A grim-faced, elderly man, with shaggy eyebrows and gray hair, answered.

"This is the yacht *Isis,*" he said. "My name is Garth—Humphrey Garth—owner. It's not easy to put one's feelings into words in circumstances such as these, captain. Your schooner is replaceable—insured anyhow, probably. It's the men who have lost their lives." Mr. Garth's voice had grown a little hoarse—he cleared his throat. "How big a crew had you, Captain Mumm?"

"Seven—all natives," replied Captain Mumm gruffly. "But we lost three in the bad weather we had the last ten days."

"That leaves four—out there—somewhere." Mr. Garth spoke in a strained way. "And this man here with you—he's your mate, I suppose?"

Now! It was coming now. Peter's lips tightened. Thank God, she wasn't looking at him! She had drawn a little behind the circle—the dark-haired man who had scowled almost hid her from view. Unconsciously Peter squared his shoulders. Well, then—let it come! His eyes fastened on Captain Mumm.

Captain Mumm had swung half round, and—meeting Peter's stare—the shrewd little eyes narrowed.

And slowly Captain Mumm rubbed a hand up and down what was, Peter could see now, a distinctly swollen jaw.

"Him!" ejaculated the little red-haired man tersely. "No fear! He ain't no mate! No, nor even a sailor! He——" Captain Mumm paused, and his hand, from his jaw, went up to scratch at the shock of fiery red hair.

Peter's hands clenched until the knuckles cracked. He was in the full glare of the light. It was unbearable! Pray God, he'd play the man!

"He," said the little red-haired skipper, still scratching, "he's a sort of—of supercargo, me not being good at figures, and, moreover and in particular, a white man that I take along to live with."

Peter's hand went swinging to his forehead, brushing back the wet hair out of his eyes in a dazed way. There came surging upon him a sense of incredulity —that fought madly with a sense of reason which insistently affirmed that he had heard aright. The conflict seemed to numb his faculties, to rob him of the power of either speech or movement.

"I see," said Humphrey Garth.

"His name's Dunn," said the little red-haired skipper, as though it were an afterthought. "Alec Dunn."

And then a quiet voice spoke—clear and soft, with just the suggestion of a tremor in it.

"Father, don't you think these men need attention dry clothes and food?"

"Yes, you're right, Marion," Mr. Garth answered with bluff heartiness. "And the best the *Isis* has to offer! Plenty of time for talk later on. Now then, Captain Mumm, and you, Mr. Dunn, if you'll just come along below we'll see what we can do for you."

Peter's hand lifted and swept once more across his

eyes. He could not see her any more. The group had closed in around the little red-haired skipper and himself. It was like that other night when faces and forms had come between them, blotting each out from the other's sight. But there was something else now —something else between them. Only his mind seemed bewildered, confused. A—a sort of reprieve. Alec Dunn!

In a dazed way Peter found himself moving along the deck with Captain Josephus Mumm, and Mr. Garth, and one or two others around him. Why couldn't he clear his mind of confusion? Not Peter Blake, wanted for the murder of Tom Murchison—not Peter Blake—Alec Dunn!

CHAPTER X

THE SURVIVORS

THREE bells—half-past nine!

Was it only half-past nine? Only an hour since the *Break O' Dawn* had gone down? Incredible! Peter sat in an easy chair and stared at Captain Mumm, who had flung himself down on one of the twin beds in the luxuriously appointed stateroom. A steward was removing the remains of a meal that had just been served to them.

Peter's eyes shifted from Captain Mumm to the steward. The fellow was an immaculate little chap, an East Indian obviously, but with a most perfect command of English, and the man smiled cordially, and was undoubtedly anxious to please and be obliging, but Peter wished the man would go. What with bringing in suits of clothes, and suits of pyjamas, and trays of food, the man had been constantly in and out of the stateroom from the moment he, Peter, had found himself its co-occupant with Captain Mumm. And now, his mind no longer in any sort of daze, he wanted to talk to Captain Josephus Mumm more seriously than he had ever wanted to talk to any one before.

The steward moved toward the door, his tasks apparently at an end.

"Is there anything else you would like, gentlemen? Anything that I can bring you?" he inquired, with an inviting smile. "Mr. Garth's orders, sirs."

"Thank you, no," said Peter.

"If you will ring—at any hour," smiled the little man.

"Right!" said Peter.

The door closed.

Peter got up from his chair, and stood for a moment motionless, his eyes fixed on Captain Josephus Mumm again. The little red-haired skipper was in pyjamas —had promptly donned them, in fact, the moment they had arrived, and in that costume had eaten his meal, just served by the steward.

"Swallowed a bit too much ocean, I figure," the little skipper had grunted by way of explanation. "Ain't feeling too good, and ain't going to tog up. I'm going to turn in, and sleep—Lord!—sleep! No watch to keep! Sleep till morning—that's me. And you better do likewise, my lad." But Peter had shaken his head at that suggestion, and had put on a suit of "whites"—probably contributed by one of the yacht's officers—that he had found ready for him. Sleep! To-night! *She* was up there somewhere on deck. Marion! He knew her name. He had heard her father call her by name. Marion Garth. Sleep! To-night! Out of all the nights of his life, this night marked a crisis whose aftermath, whatever it might be, would endure to the end of his days. Aftermath! What would that aftermath be? He wanted to see her; he must see her, talk to her to-night. But first he must talk to this man here—Captain Josephus Mumm—the red-haired, irascible, and once unlovely little devil of a man, who had suddenly transformed himself in so unexpected a fashion into a very human friend, and—Peter smiled a little wanly now—at the cost of five thousand pounds to himself. Two hours ago Captain Mumm had lived merely for that five thousand pounds; half an hour ago he had glibly tossed it away—a sacrifice that, knowing the little skipper as he, Peter, knew the other, was not easily measured.

But in the long run, hadn't it been futile, useless—a *beau geste* that rebounded upon itself with ugly complications, both for the man who had made it and for the man on whose behalf it had been made? What was he, Peter, going to do? Could he face her as—Alec Dunn? Was it any easier to face her as Peter Blake? In the last analysis he knew that he alone must decide; but this man here—first. For that *beau geste,* whatever its ultimate consequences, he was conscious of a strange new liking and a warm-hearted admiration for the man who had made it.

He moved across the cabin, and, standing beside the bed, leaned over and laid both his hands on the little red-haired skipper's shoulders. For a moment his gaze held the other's steadfastly, then one hand slipped away, found Captain Josephus Mumm's hand, and locked the other's in a tight, eloquent grip.

"I haven't had a chance of saying it before," said Peter huskily; "but what you did up there on deck a little while ago was as decent a thing as one man ever did for another."

Captain Mumm blinked—and abruptly sat bolt upright on the bed.

"Humph!" he grunted. "And you didn't expect it of one of my kidney neither, did you, eh? Kind of left you as flabby as a jellyfish, what?"

"No," said Peter quietly; "from what I'd seen of you, to be perfectly truthful, it wasn't at all what I expected you to do; but that makes it all the more——"

"And I didn't expect to, neither," interrupted the other gruffly. "And I came near not doing it, too, I'll have you know! Any one that was blamed fool enough to let his chance slip out there in the water, with no-

body left but himself, and where he'd be able to pitch any yarn he liked if he was picked up, ought to have got what was coming to him, instead of the other fellow making of himself the worse fool of the two! Been regretting it ever since, too, I have!"

"Have you?" asked Peter softly.

"Aye, blast you!" snapped Captain Josephus Mumm. "Five thousand pounds gone to glory!"

Peter smiled. Their hands were still clasped in a mighty grip.

"Damn it," said Peter, and his voice was suddenly as gruff as the other's, "I didn't know it before, but you're a white man, Captain Mumm! The whitest I ever met!"

"Damn it," jerked out the little red-haired skipper, "you bashed my jaw out there in the water harder than any man ever hit Captain Josephus Mumm before! But if you'll pass the bottle I see that grinning squirt of a steward left handy over there on the table, I'll have a drink with you—Mr. Dunn."

Peter released the other's hand, went over to the table, filled two glasses with Scotch and soda, and handed one to Captain Mumm. Then he drew up a chair to the bedside and sat down.

"Here's mud in your eye!" said Captain Mumm with a sudden and hearty chuckle—and swallowed the contents of his glass at a single gulp. "Well, go ahead, my lad"—as Peter set his glass, scarcely touched, back on the table—"I see you've something else on your mind. Let's have it."

"Yes," said Peter gravely. "I have—quite a lot. I know what prompted you to do what you did, and I've already told you what I think of that; but I'm afraid it's no go. Up there on deck it came so sud-

denly and unexpectedly, that it—well—it sort of stunned me mentally, and we were hustled in here before I got a grip on myself again. But now I've had a chance to think it over, and—well, I like the name of Peter Blake better than I do the name of Alec Dunn."

Captain Josephus Mumm scowled.

"So!" he growled. "Well, I fancy, then, I can tell you why. I had an idea you and that young lady was staring at each other as if you'd met before. I kind of figured I was taking a chance—but then it didn't seem possible, else you'd have spoken to each other. How about it? Am I right?"

"Yes," Peter answered briefly. "We have seen each other before."

Captain Mumm, still scowling, tugged now somewhat viciously at his tawny beard.

"That ain't so nice, and mabbe a bit awkward for me as well as you," he commented. "You're afraid she'll give you away, eh?"

Peter shook his head.

"No," he said. "The only name she knows me by is the one you gave me up there on the deck—Alec Dunn."

The little red-haired skipper's fingers took a firmer clutch on his beard.

"Look here," he exploded, "I ain't no good at riddles."

"It's not a riddle," Peter said quietly. "I saw her once in a crowd—years ago—in London. That's all."

Captain Josephus Mumm's jaw dropped, and for a moment he stared at Peter helplessly; then suddenly a broad grin overspread his face.

"My word!" he ejaculated. "In a crowd once—

years ago—in London! Blimy! I think I'll trouble you for that bottle again!"

"No," said Peter; "we're going to talk this out."

"All right," said Captain Mumm. "Go ahead! If you ain't afraid she's going to give you away, what's the reason you ain't satisfied with the name of Alec Dunn?"

"There are two reasons," said Peter steadily; "though there is really only one that counts—the first one. I *am* Peter Blake. I don't want to run, and I don't want to hide. I'm not a murderer; I'm not a criminal. I don't want to skulk around under another name. I'm not a crook. I'm not afraid to face this rotten thing they say I've done, no matter what the consequences may be. The second reason is merely a grossly material one. It wouldn't do me any good, anyhow. I couldn't get away with it, if I wanted to. You said my description was out everywhere. Sooner or later I'd be caught. As a matter of fact, I'm likely to be recognized on board here when daylight comes. And once caught under such circumstances—pawning myself off as somebody else—it would condemn me out of hand as being proof positive of my guilt."

"H'm!" said the little red-haired skipper coolly. "Well, it's the second reason that counts most with me, 'cause it settles the matter right from the start; whereas the first, being what you might call a bit ethereal, you can think over at your leisure. Therefore, my lad, I'll answer the second first. No matter what name you're caught under, you haven't got a chance once the police get their hands on you; so that settles that. There's no chance of Yar Lal or any of the others being picked up now, so *they* can't talk. As for the rest, there ain't any *photograph* of you at-

tached to them police notices. There's more'n a few thousand men in these parts that'll answer to it mabbe neater than you would. I came across you under peculiar circumstances, and with corroborating evidence, so to speak, to point out who you were—that motor boat, for instance. Y'understand? Here, it's the other way round, with the corroborating evidence all in favor of you being some one else. Ain't you run down in mid-ocean, and ain't your skipper said your name was Dunn, and that you was one of his crew? My eye! There ain't a hope of any one on this hooker clapping his hand on your shoulder and saying you're the fellow thusly and so described, unless there's somebody that actually knows you. And the chances of that ain't good enough to start you taking in any reefs, not yet awhile! And that being so, and as, according to what I understand from Mr. Garth, this boat's going up to pay a social call at some chap's island that's aboard as a guest, you're safe enough for the time being anyhow."

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"I said I wasn't much interested in that end of it," he observed laconically.

"Mabbe so," said the little red-haired skipper sharply; "but *I* am—having already got myself mixed up in it. And having disposed of that to *my* satisfaction, we'll take a squint through the other end of the spy-glass. What good is it going to do you to go up there on deck and bawl out the fact that you're Peter Blake, and wanted for murder, and ask some one to come and arrest you quick? You haven't got a chance! The evidence is dead against you from start to finish. There ain't a jury that would ever leave their seats to talk it over. There's a difference between being too proud to duck for shelter and being

a plain damned fool. If you think so much of your blamed name, you'd better do a little thinking at the same time along the line of digging it out of the muck. It'll be a lot muckier when you're dangling on the end of a rope, my lad. Being innocent, the thing to do is to prove you're innocent, and the only way to do that is to fight, and the only chance you've got to fight is to be Alec Dunn until you can get your fingers on the swine's throat that put up the job on you."

Peter, from studying the floor with knitted brows, looked up suddenly with a quick and quizzical smile.

"How long is it since you've decided I was innocent?" he inquired pointedly.

Captain Josephus Mumm's unhandsome features became contracted in what was meant to be a broad and confidential grin.

"Fair enough!" he exclaimed heartily. "That's fair enough, my lad—and I'll answer it. It was when you bashed my jaw out there in the water. It ain't logic or reason to suppose a man who'd do what you did out there would go around sticking a knife into a man in his sleep—not for all the pearls in Polynesia!"

Peter was still smiling quizzically.

"Possibly the jury would take the same view," he suggested.

"Not on your life!" declared Captain Mumm, and added a deep-throated oath by way of emphasis. "They'd say we were in cahoots for the pearls—me having supplied you with a false identity. I tell you there's only one thing to do, and one chance to save both your neck and that precious name of yours, and that's to keep under cover and play the same game that's being played on you. You're satisfied that the murder was deliberately planted on you, ain't you?"

Peter straightened up in his chair, suddenly tight-lipped.

"Naturally!" he said grimly.

"Right!" said the little red-haired skipper coolly. "And as things are now, the minute you go shouting around that you're Peter Blake, all you do is play into their hands, and that's all you get out of it. You ain't going to take it lying down, are you—like a beaten pup? I've seen you fight once, and what I'm saying now is that here's where you've got the biggest fight you've ever had on your hands. Go out after 'em with their own tools! Nobody else is going to, because everybody's satisfied it begins and ends with Peter Blake—the way they wanted it to be believed. Find 'em, my lad, dig the rats out of their holes, fasten it on 'em—and then you've got some reason for going around with a label on you stating that you're Peter Blake! That's the course to steer, you take it from me; and, that being the case, I'll say here and now that Captain Josephus Mumm 'll stand by and lend a hand till the crack of doom."

Peter was staring with knitted brows again at the floor. Every physical instinct he possessed bade him thrust out his hand and seal a pact with this belligerent and forceful little man on the bed—and yet something within him held him back. Was it an exaggerated sense of honor—unduly exaggerated; was it, in the face of ordinary common sense, merely a stubbornly quixotic impulse, that was not only unreasonable and illogical, but one that foolishly and brainlessly courted disaster?

He got up abruptly from his chair and began to pace the cabin—and then once more he halted by the bedside and laid his hand on the little red-haired skipper's shoulder.

"Don't think I do not appreciate what you've said, or what you've offered," he said earnestly. "But I don't know! It's not easy to decide. You talk of running those devils who were on that ship that night to earth. How is that to be done? It will require money, and, so far as I am concerned"—he thrust his hand into his pocket, and, with a wry smile, displayed its contents—"here's where I stand on that count, just as I told you that day in Hafu's hut."

In the palm of Peter's hand were six shillings, and a long, slender, curiously shaped key.

Captain Mumm leaned a little forward.

"What's that?" he inquired. "The key, I mean."

"Oh, that"—Peter laughed shortly—"that's a souvenir of the occasion we're talking about. I found it in the bottom of Murchison's motor boat the next morning when I regained consciousness. The sun was shining on it, and it hurt my eyes."

"Humph! Murchison's, probably!" observed the little skipper with a grunt. "He probably dropped it there the day before. I dunno as it's wise for you to hang on to it."

"I don't think it was Murchison's. I never saw him with one like it," Peter answered. He stared for a moment thoughtfully at the key, then returned it, with the money, to his pocket. "Anyway, I've kept it so far, and I can't see where it is going to do me any harm. Let's get back to what I was saying. You talk of running those devils down. How is it to be done, without money, without freedom of action, and without a clue to either their identity or their whereabouts?"

"How?" spluttered the irascible little skipper. "Damme, I don't know how! That's to be thought out. But I'll tell you something. There's been some

strange doings going on around in these parts for the last few years. Queer things! And I've heard queer things. I go where most men don't—up around the fringes of civilization, and where there ain't any civilization at all. There's been a murder here, and a wholesale beach robbery there—a lot of them. It's mostly been put down to marauding Malays—the *Orang-laut,* or sea pirates as they call 'em; but opinion is beginning to change. And I'll tell you why. About a year ago, a small packet-boat left Singapore with her owner aboard and about ten thousand pounds in cash to settle some deal he'd made with some chap up in the Natuna Islands. There wasn't any bad weather —but nothing was ever heard of the boat or any one aboard her again. They put that down to the *Orang-laut* too—till the owner's wife swore her husband had kept the fact that he was carrying that sum of money a secret even from his crew. How'd you account for the Malays knowing that? And since then there's been a dozen other occasions through the islands where large sums were secured, and where it looked as though there must have been inside knowledge obtained by some devilishly clever work. And on top of that there's rumors—I've heard 'em myself from all kinds of natives in all kinds of places—about a man they call the Great White Devil. A bit queer, ain't it? A dozen different languages, mind you; but, translated, it always means the same—the Great White Devil. They never get any farther than that—just the name. Whether they don't know any more, or whether they're too frightened to say any more, I don't know—but I know what I'm telling you is true. And there's more than me thinks to-day it's a white man's brains that's back of the whole business."

"There were natives of some sort there the night

Murchison was murdered," said Peter quickly; "but there was a white man, if not two, at their head."

"Yes," said the little red-haired skipper quickly, "and having changed my mind about you, I'll lay a quid or two it's the same dirty lot I'm talking about. Only they're playing a trickier game now—beginning to cover their tracks by dropping scapegoats astern. It looks to me as though things were getting a little warm, and they've tumbled to the fact that they've been inviting too much attention to the rumors that were going around, so they stuck the Murchison killing on you. Would you know that white man again?"

Peter's face hardened.

"Yes—if I heard him laugh," he said, with a twisted smile.

"Eh?" demanded Captain Josephus Mumm, staring a little helplessly. "What did you say? If you heard him laugh?"

"Yes," said Peter. "I didn't see his face, but he had a laugh like—like a woman's."

"Blimy!" ejaculated Captain Mumm tersely. "Like a woman's! How do you know it *wasn't* a woman?"

"Oh, no!" returned Peter decisively. "I'm sure of that. There was nothing womanish about his voice—and perhaps I haven't described the laugh in a way you'd understand, either. And I don't know that I can. I said it was like a woman's because it was so soft—rippling—like velvet. It was diabolical under the circumstances. Once heard you would never forget it, but you would have to hear it yourself to——"

"Damme! Mabbe I will!" interrupted the little red-haired skipper suddenly. "Peter, my lad, while we've been yarning I've been thinking, and I'll answer that 'how' of yours now. Firstly, it stands to reason

that the crowd with that ship of theirs, schooner, or brig, or whatever it was, that did Murchison down that night, ain't to be found walking around the streets of Sydney, Auckland, or Singapore—they're somewhere up in the islands—somewhere, say, between the Navigators and the Peninsula. That's a longish stretch, and it's something like saying that somebody's address is in Asia; but that's where they are. And, furthermore, hidden away somewhere in the islands they're bound to have their filthy nest. D'you follow me?"

Peter nodded his head.

"Of course!" he said. "That's rather obvious, isn't it?"

"Aye!" returned Captain Josephus Mumm a little tartly. "It is! I ain't aiming to be no detective hero in a story book, 'cause if I was I wouldn't pay no attention to what's obvious and what everybody else can see except the aforesaid detective, who has to be stony blind until the last chapter. And here's something else that's obvious too. The one man more'n any other who can poke his nose into places up there where no one else goes, and who can do it without arousing any suspicion is Captain Josephus Mumm. 'Cause why? 'Cause I've been doing it, trading wherever the wind blew, since before the time you swapped your safety pins for pants buttons. D'you see?"

Peter leaned sharply forward in his chair.

"Yes," he said tensely. "And I'd understand if the *Break O' Dawn*——"

"I ain't worrying none about the *Break O' Dawn*," cut in the little red-haired skipper. "I had a bit of insurance on her—enough to buy a better boat, a small brig she is, that I know of, and that I've had my eye

on for a year past. And as for you, I'll say it's a lucky thing the *Break O' Dawn*'s where she is. Here's the idea, my lad. I'm going trading again with that there brig, and you're coming along. The trading'll put as much money in my pocket as ever, only mabbe we'll wander about a little more'n usual, and take a look at some of the out-of-the-way places I ain't never been to before. Savvy? On top of the trading we'll be man-hunting. I ain't saying it won't take time; I ain't saying that even a year or two 'll do it; but in the meantime you're safe, and at the end I'll stake my davy we'll run 'em down. What do you think now, my lad, about turning up your nose at the name of Alec Dunn?"

Peter's hand gripped suddenly hard on the arm of his chair. Well—what? He stared at the little red-haired skipper on the bed, who was grinning complacently at him now. And then Peter found his voice.

"I think," he said slowly, "that you are right and that I'd be a damn fool if I didn't, but——" He broke off sharply, rose abruptly from his chair for the second time, and began to pace the cabin with nervous strides.

"Well," chuckled the little man on the bed, "there's nothing worse that I know of in the world than a damned fool. And if you've got that far, you'd better swallow your 'buts' without choking too much over 'em. What?"

But this time Peter did not answer. He had come to an abrupt halt in the center of the cabin. Some one was knocking at the stateroom door.

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRETARY

PETER looked inquiringly at Captain Josephus Mumm. The knock was repeated.

"Now don't you make no breaks, anyhow!" cautioned the little red-haired skipper. "And treat 'em nice, whoever it is." He raised his voice: "Come in!"

The door opened and a young man with small black eyes, whose hair was almost too carefully parted, and who was attired in dinner clothes, stepped forward—and then hesitated on the threshold, as his eyes, sweeping the room, rested on the pyjama-clad figure on the bed.

"I am afraid I am intruding," he said apologetically. "You are just retiring."

"Don't worry none about that," said Captain Josephus Mumm with unusual civility; and then with a grin, as the sound of a tenor voice, low, but remarkably clear and true, floated in through the open doorway: "What's going on—a concert? That's some voice that chap has got out there!"

"It's that infernal steward, Lahat Khan!" said the young man, with a sudden frown. "The one that was in here. We call him 'the singing steward.' He sings all over the place. Everybody's up on deck and he's making hay in the lounge. I'll stop it at once!" He turned as though to put his threat into execution.

"Don't you do it, or I'll be sorry I mentioned it," expostulated the little red-haired skipper promptly.

"We didn't have no singing on the *Break O' Dawn,* and it does me good. Let the beggar alone, and come in, Mr.——" he paused interrogatively.

"Jaffray's my name," supplied the young man. He hesitated an instant as though still undecided whether to reprimand the offending Lahat Khan or not; then he stepped forward into the stateroom and closed the door behind him. "J. George Jaffray," he added. "I'm Mr. Garth's secretary."

"Glad to know you!" said Captain Josephus Mumm heartily.

Peter pushed a chair forward.

"Sit down, won't you?" he invited.

"Well, if you're sure I'm not keeping you up"—Jaffray glanced at Captain Mumm—"and if you feel fit enough for a few minutes' chat, I'd be glad to do so. Mr. Garth thought the full and detailed report of what has happened should be sent out as promptly as possible. The bare announcement of the sinking of your schooner has already been made by wireless; but we've also a broadcasting set aboard, and the story in detail can be sent out much more readily that way. In fact, I was even going to suggest that if you'd step into the lounge—we've a neat little station partitioned off there—you might like to tell the story yourself."

"What!" ejaculated Captain Josephus Mumm humorously. "And cut in on that chap broadcasting his song, as I dare say he's doing if he and the 'set,' as you call it, are both in the lounge! No fear!"

Again Jaffray frowned.

"To answer you literally," he said, "I can only say that he'd hardly have the temerity to do that. But seriously, captain, would you care to act on my suggestion?"

"No!" said the little red-haired skipper bluntly. "Seriously, I wouldn't! I ain't no hand at spinning yarns into those kind of things. I never saw one of 'em in my lif . And, besides, I ain't dressed for the occasion. I'll leave it to you, Mr. Jaffray. I'll tell you anything you want to know—and you can go as far as you like."

"Very good!" said Jaffray pleasantly. He pulled a note-book from his pocket. "I'll jot it down as you go along."

Captain Josephus Mumm nodded assent, glanced with a bland eye at Peter, fingered his tawny beard, and propped his shoulders comfortably against a pillow.

"Where'll I begin?" he asked.

"Well, if you don't mind," said Jaffray, "from the beginning of the voyage."

"Right, you are!" agreed Captain Josephus Mumm readily. "Though it ain't so easy to say where any voyage of mine begins or ends, trading the way I do from island to island mostly, year in and year out. I'll begin from the time we left Fiji. We ran into cruel bad weather almost from the start, and it lasted so long and got so bad, what with losing two overboard and one with a smashed head from a falling block, that the native crew went blot-o with fright, and started to run amuck. Dunn, here, and me managed to beat 'em off, there being only four of them left, and then——"

Peter was no longer listening. He drew up a chair facing Jaffray, who was writing briskly in his note-book now, and sat down. One might assume from the skipper's version, if it ever occurred to any one to assume anything in connection therewith, that he, Peter, had been a member of Captain Mumm's crew

from the beginning of time. Well? His mind was back on his own problem. Hadn't he decided yet? Then, why hadn't he? Captain Josephus Mumm had already compromised himself beyond repair—no, hardly that! Captain Mumm need not necessarily have known his, Peter's, real identity at any time.

What *was* the issue anyhow? That it went against the grain to hide, to skulk under an assumed name? Yes, in a nutshell, that was it. But would it be skulking? It depended on the motive. If he allowed this to go on, passed himself off as one Alec Dunn, would it be through cowardice, through fear to face the issue as Peter Blake because almost certain conviction awaited him if he did? He smiled quietly—apparently due to interested attention in the little skipper's story; in reality, at his own question. His conscience was clear on that point. Fear had nothing whatever to do with it. It did not enter into the matter at all.

As though it were some extraneous sound, the skipper's voice reached Peter now in a sort of unending murmur, as his mind reviewed the evidence against him, point by point, step by step, precisely as it had done a thousand times before. The result was the same. Without a shadow of doubt, unless he obtained evidence in rebuttal, he was condemned from the start. Where did ethics come in—how big a part did ethics play? Should one commit suicide for the sake—oh, damn it! The sake of *what?* Had he the right to make an effort in any way he could, even at the expense of temporarily accepting the rôle of a guilty fugitive, to obtain the evidence that he must have, and without which, whether he gave himself up or not, whether as Alec Dunn or not, and whether as a fugitive he was eventually caught or not, the name of Peter Blake would be forever known as synonymous

with treacherous and cold-blooded murder? Had he the right to fight for his name and his life—or was it the finer thing to do to play the martyr, and play, as Captain Mumm had so pertinently pointed out, into the very hands of those who were guilty? Here was a chance. The little skipper's plan was practicable. What was the argument against it? Logic, reason, common sense, an absolutely clear conscience urged him unanimously and with almost savage impatience to accept Captain Mumm's offer—and yet he still hesitated. Why? Marion's face rose before him. Had she anything to do with it? Was she a factor in the decision he was trying to make? In what way? Why? To what extent? Suppose she——

Peter was conscious of a lull in Captain Mumm's voice. The little skipper had been talking for a long while, hadn't he? Except for the opening sentences, he, Peter, had not heard a word. The rather overcarefully groomed secretary was putting away his notebook. There was something about Mr. J. George Jaffray's face that didn't appeal—nothing particularly wrong—but something weak about the chin and mouth, and something that gave the impression of secretiveness. Clever, though—undoubtedly. Or was it shrewdness? Anyway, far from a fool. The chap would have to be capable to hold the position of secretary to a man of Mr. Garth's obvious wealth and position. Wealth! Position! He hadn't thought of that before. Marion was Mr. Garth's daughter. And he, Peter, was—what?

Jaffray was speaking.

"I'm much obliged to you, Captain Mumm, I'm sure," he said heartily. "And Mr. Garth will be, too—he has taken the matter very much to heart—the loss of life, you know. However, I won't keep you up

any longer except that I'd—er"—he hesitated slightly —"I'd like to ask you a question on my own account."

"Fire ahead," invited Captain Mumm. "I told you before you weren't keeping me up. What is it?"

"Well," said Jaffray, "you spoke of having traded for years amongst the islands; and, in fact, that you've just come from the neighborhood of Fiji."

"Came from Fiji itself," corrected the little skipper bluntly.

"Yes," said Jaffray. "Then perhaps you've heard of that Murchison case—the chap who was murdered on one of the islands of the Talimotu group by a man named Peter Blake?"

Peter straightened up suddenly in his chair. He glanced at Captain Mumm. The little red-haired skipper was readjusting his shoulders on the pillow.

"I have," said Captain Josephus Mumm lazily. "Heard about it in Fiji. There's a big reward out for him, isn't there?"

"Five thousand pounds," said Jaffray in a slightly lowered tone.

Peter, alert and intent, watched Jaffray now. Something in the man's voice seemed to strike a note of avarice; and, somehow, the latent shrewdness in the other's expression seemed to have accentuated itself. What was the man driving at? He didn't suspect, did he?

"Well," drawled Captain Mumm, "there's a description of him out, and so I guess somebody'll cash in the winning ticket."

Jaffray shook his head.

"I'm not so sure," he said; "not if there wasn't anything to go on but a description. There's a lot of men who would answer to any description, no matter how detailed and exact it was. Take the present case,

for instance." He turned and stared at Peter for a moment. "Why, look here!" he exclaimed. "Here's a case in point! Mr. Dunn, here, as an example, would answer to it perfectly; and if his identity wasn't unquestionably established as being somebody who wasn't Peter Blake he'd be worth taking a flier on for that five thousand—six feet in height, broad-shouldered, unusually muscular in development, light brown hair, gray eyes, square chin, and all that."

Peter straightened up a little in his chair. In one sense he found himself strangely indifferent, except that from a source quite outside himself, his problem was perhaps to be solved for him here and now; he was more conscious of a grim and ironical sense of humor than of anything else. What was this? A cat-and-mouse game—or merely a natural comment with no ulterior meaning behind it? He glanced again at Captain Mumm. Captain Mumm was grinning broadly.

"I fancy that's the nearest Dunn's ever come, or will come, to being worth five thousand pounds," chuckled the little red-haired skipper. "You seem to have the description down pretty pat, Mr. Jaffray."

"I have," said Jaffray almost eagerly. "In fact, it was—that is, Mr. Garth is very much interested in the affair. But I won't go into that to-night. Mr. Garth will probably speak to you about it himself, and he might not be any too pleased to find that after your trying experience I had bothered you with outside matters. You see? What I want to ask you is what you think a man in Blake's position would do—where'd he go, and all that, you know?"

Peter's eyes still held on the little red-haired skipper. Captain Mumm, scratching dubiously at his head, was eyeing the secretary blandly.

"That's a bit of a question, ain't it?" he countered.

"Yes; but the answer's worth five thousand pounds," said Jaffray significantly.

"My word!" ejaculated Captain Mumm, "so that's the lay, is it?"

Jaffray hitched forward in his chair.

"Look here," he said, his voice lowered, "I take it that under the circumstances, since Mr. Dunn is a man who has sailed with you, he's rather a factor in the case, too. You won't mind my speaking out quite plainly?"

"Anything you say in front of Dunn won't go no farther," said Captain Josephus Mumm confidentially. "Go ahead!"

"Well, then," said Jaffray, "for private reasons, that five thousand pounds, or some of it, would be a big lift to me, and it struck me all of a heap when you began to talk about having spent most of your life sailing amongst the islands, that here was a chance. I haven't got much faith in that description business, as witness Mr. Dunn here who proves how easily it can go wide of the mark—I mean, of course, without something to back it up. If there's any man living who would be able to figure out this fellow Blake's possible and probable movements after he got away from Murchison's island, it's you. I think I could arrange to have any likely suggestions you made followed up, and if anything came of it you'd get your share, of course; and I'd split with you on any basis that you considered fair." Mr. Jaffray's face was eager, flushed somewhat. "What do you say?"

Captain Josephus Mumm did not answer at once. He appeared to ruminate, pondering deeply the other's words.

"Well," he said at last, "after what's happened to

my bit of a hooker to-night, I'll say flat I'd consider it providential, as you might say, if a slice of that five thousand, big or little, came my way—and you can count me in, Mr. Jaffray, and no blooming error! But so far as giving an opinion as to what's most likely become of this Blake, it'll take a bit of thinking over. I've got to know a whole lot more about it than I do now. Suppose we let it go until to-morrow, and then you give me what ins and outs of it you have, and we'll get our heads together. How's that? Being aboard here and nothing else to do, there won't be no time lost."

"Fine!" said Jaffray heartily. He rose briskly from his chair, and looked from one to the other. "And—er—I'd be just as glad if—well, if nothing were said about there being any little working agreement between us. I'll explain more fully to-morrow, and I think you'll understand why."

"Don't need to understand any more than I do now! In a thing of this kind the closer you keep your mouth shut the better your chances are. That's me!" said Captain Josephus Mumm judicially.

"Well, I'll be off, then," said Jaffray—and moved toward the door.

Peter, too, had risen from his chair. Jaffray he had now put down as a bit of a fool—if not something worse. There might be a serious side to what had been said, but there was certainly no cat-and-mouse game here, and it was fairly obvious that the man harbored not the slightest suspicion; of that he, Peter, was fully convinced—and from that standpoint he had already dismissed the whole matter from his mind.

"I think you said everybody was up on deck, Mr. Jaffray," he said calmly; "so I presume Miss Garth is there?"

"Why, yes"—Jaffray looked a little surprised—"at least, she was on deck just before I came down here."

"I wonder, then, if I could see her for a few moments?"

Jaffray still looked his surprise.

"Miss Garth? Why, yes—certainly. Er—of course! I'm sure she'll be glad to see you. Shall I tell her?"

"Yes, if you will," said Peter. "I'll be up on deck in a few minutes."

"Right!" said Jaffray. "I'll tell her." He moved to the door. "Well, till to-morrow then, captain. Good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Captain Josephus Mumm genially.

The door closed. Jaffray's footsteps died away along the little alleyway outside.

Captain Mumm raised himself on his elbow and stared at Peter.

"Well, what d'you think of that!" he exclaimed.

"Not very much," said Peter, with a grim smile, "except that I wouldn't trust the man unless he were bonded, and that I'm beginning to acquire a fairly definite sense of value—as applied to five thousand pounds." He stepped toward the door.

"H'm!" said the little red-haired skipper—and lifted an eyebrow quizzically. Then abruptly: "Where're you going?"

"You know!" said Peter. "You heard me say I was going up on deck to see Miss Garth."

Captain Mumm plucked at his beard.

"Yes, so you did!" he grunted. "And that brings us to the main question. From the ship's motion, I figure we are standing by on the chance of still picking up one of my natives; but, as I said, there ain't

a chance of that now, and Garth's only salving his conscience—so I'm saying again that don't enter into it so far as one of 'em coming aboard to say who you are is concerned. So what's the answer? You ain't given none yet. Alec Dunn—or Peter Blake?"

Peter opened the door and stepped across the threshold.

"That's what I'm going up there for now—to decide," he answered quietly—and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XII

ALIAS ALEC DUNN

PETER made his way slowly toward the deck. His mind was in turmoil now. He did not know why he had told Captain Mumm he was going to *her* in order to make his decision. Something spontaneous within him had prompted it. What was it? He did not know. It would force the issue irretrievably, of course, one way or the other—but why should she decide him? Was his decision to depend on her attitude toward him, her actions, what she said, how she looked?

He pushed his hand across his forehead and found it damp with perspiration. Why should this all have come about? Why should he have been selected as the sport of fate? Why could he not have gone to this girl, who had come into his life that night years ago in London, as a man fair-named and free to win her if he could? A savage fury came upon him, a railing against fate. Impotence!

Would it be better—better for her, and better for him—if he turned back even now, returned to Captain Mumm, and let things take their course? No! He *wanted* to see her—wanted to look into her eyes, wanted to hear her voice. Fate could play its hell's tricks if it would, but he would not be cheated out of this! Afterwards there might be a bitter price to pay—but for a few moments, even if he decided that he would tell her he was Peter Blake before he left her, he would have had the memory of that little while, when, as though he were a man with all his

franchised rights to love and life and happiness, she and he had been together. And judge thereby what the might-have-been could have held! And so, with that added meaning, perhaps torment himself the more! Well, suppose it did! Instinctively he squared his shoulders. A few steps from here was the woman he loved. He was going to her, come what would!

He stepped out on the promenade deck and stood for a moment by the companionway entrance looking about him. They were still searching in a forlorn hope for Yar Lal and his mates. The yacht was moving very slowly, with scarcely any way on her at all. The fog seemed, if anything, more dense than before; but the deck lights outlined two forms who were walking toward him from the direction of the bridge —Jaffray and the cloaked figure of a girl.

She was coming!

He felt the blood surge suddenly in mighty, pounding blows through his veins. Marion! It was her name—and not strange to him! Marion—as though he had known her always as Marion! He stepped forward. He heard Jaffray speak:

"Miss Garth, this is Mr. Dunn."

And then Jaffray passed on, and they were face to face—alone.

Her hand, cool, and yet it seemed with a sort of strange timidity, lay in his; his own was hot, fiery, burning, trembling a little, he felt. He leaned closer to her, drinking in every feature of her face with his eyes—the gold of her hair, shining even in the misty light; the daintily modelled little chin; the ivory of her shoulders beneath the loose cloak; the full white throat beginning to tinge with faintest pink; the lips whose smile seemed suddenly tremulous; the eyes,

wide at first, slightly hidden now beneath lowered lids, blue with that blue he had come to liken to the wondrous blue of the tropical, sunlit seas.

She had not withdrawn her hand; she did so now, almost as though in confused and sudden haste.

"You have suffered no ill effects from what you have been through?" she asked quickly. "I am so glad. It—it has been a terrible experience. We are all so grieved, and father is almost beside himself at the fate of those poor men. We are still searching for them, you see; but Captain Stone says there isn't the slightest hope. And Captain Mumm, is he——"

"Quite all right," Peter answered. He found it an effort to steady his voice. "He's a bit fagged out, that's all. He'll be as fit as ever in the morning."

A silence fell awkwardly between them for a moment. It was Marion who broke it.

"You—Mr. Jaffray told me that you wanted to see me," she said a little hesitantly.

Something within Peter tore restraint ruthlessly aside.

"I have wanted to see you since that night in London two years ago," he said hoarsely. "That night—you have not forgotten it! You knew me again as I stood there at the gangway a little while ago—just as I knew you."

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "It is very, very strange."

She had turned slightly away, averting her face.

"Couldn't we find some chairs?" suggested Peter abruptly. "That is, unless I am keeping you from something else?"

Without answer Marion led the way to where in a recess formed by one of the deckhouses there were some steamer chairs.

As she seated herself, Peter, still standing, spoke again—as though the interruption had made no intrusion upon his train of thought.

"When I managed to get out into the street that night, you were gone," he said. "Afterwards, for weeks, I haunted the theaters, the hotels, the supper places—I never saw you again until to-night."

"I sailed for home—Australia—the next morning," she said.

"I see," said Peter. He drew a chair close to hers and sat down. There was just light enough to see her face. She was not looking at him; her eyes were fixed on a small gold signet ring that she kept twisting around and around on her little finger. "And then," Peter went on, "I looked for you in—in other places."

"In other places?" she repeated wonderingly.

"Wherever I was," Peter explained. "And I've been pretty well all over the globe since then. I was sure that some day I would see you again—but I did not expect it would be like this."

"It is the strangest thing I have ever known," she said slowly. "And I am not quite sure that I understand. You only saw me for a moment—scarcely more than a few seconds, and yet——"

"And yet," Peter interposed swiftly, "you, too, remembered." He was looking at her eagerly again. There was no disillusionment of that moment of two years ago. The dream face that he had carried with him for those two years was real—and in its reality now more wonderful and dear than ever before. "You—you look just as you looked that night," he said involuntarily under his breath.

She glanced up, a smile on her lips that obviously fought to hide a quick confusion.

"But *you* don't!" she cried gayly, as though seeking

to turn the conversation into a lighter vein. "That night you were in irreproachable evening attire, and to-night when you came aboard you were—well—very different, weren't you? And you came from such strangely different surroundings to-night—just a small trading schooner, wasn't it? I can't imagine an existence anywhere that would be more diametrically in contrast with the life of a man in London who was accustomed, I am sure, to just the sort of life that the conditions under which I saw you there would suggest. Do tell me how it happened, Mr. Dunn."

Dunn! It came like the prod of a knife thrust into a wound already raw and open, but which for a brief moment had ceased its brutal throbbing. Dunn! Not yet—perhaps he never would tell her—anyway, not yet—not for a little while—he wanted a few more of these moments with her when he was just a man and she was a woman. He framed a smile through tight lips, and shook his head.

"Tell me first about yourself, your own life," he said.

"Oh, but there is really nothing to tell about myself," she protested, laughingly. "I am just Marion Garth, the daughter of Humphrey Garth, and that embraces everything. Our home is in Sydney, and we are frequently abroad. I go to women's afternoon affairs, bridges and teas and that sort of thing, and I am interested in some of the island missions, and I go to dinners and balls, and—and I am afraid that's all. It's really more an indictment than an autobiography, isn't it?"

"Your mother?" he asked.

Marion's fingers were busy again with the little signet ring. It was a moment before she answered.

"I sometimes tell myself," she said gravely, "that

perhaps my life is not so empty of the things that are worth while and worth doing, as, just a moment ago, half jokingly, I described it. I have tried to take my mother's place in my father's life."

"I—I am sorry"—Peter stumbled for words.

She looked up now, and, leaning forward, touched him lightly on the arm.

"No! You needn't be!" She was smiling again. "It was a very natural question to ask. And now it is your turn again. Tell me about yourself—and tell me everything. There must be a great deal to tell, since we have been strangers"—she was laughing mischievously now—"for the last two years, you know."

"And during those two years," said Peter, a sudden huskiness in his voice, "have you——"

"Oh, no!" she cried in mock dismay. "That's not fair! You must play strictly according to the rules. It's *your* turn now, Mr. Dunn!"

Dunn! Again! There was something hideously remorseless about it. He lowered his head until his face was hidden, and his teeth clenched together. To palm himself off upon her under a false identity was detestable—but to *tell* her! Oh, God! Tell her—and watch that smile fade into horror and aversion; those eyes darken with loathing and disgust! He knew now what it was that, stronger even than Captain Mumm's arguments, had been tempting him to deny his own name. It *was* fear. Not fear for himself and the consequences in a physical sense—but the fear that he would have found her again only to lose her irretrievably—the fear that she would despise him, turn from him in instant abhorrence.

His mind was torturing him—and to no avail—finding no way out of the impasse. He *must* tell her something. Wait! Suppose he told her something

of his own life, enough to lay a solid foundation of truth—then perhaps she would believe the rest if he told her that, too, at the end. He knew now that what alone mattered was that he should not destroy, here where the road forked, his chance, however small and intangible it might ultimately be in any case, to win this woman he had so strangely and so sacredly come to love.

"Yes?" she prompted softly.

Peter raised his head—met her eyes, and found them smiling, wide, full of interest.

"Well," he said steadily, "everything begins with the war nowadays, though it was ended over two years ago. Like everybody else I was in the scrap—though only for the latter half of it. I"—he smiled faintly—"I wasn't quite grown up enough when it began, you see. I was at the university. The O.T.C. took me in hand, and I got over early in 'sixteen. About a year later I was wounded, and spent several months in a French hospital, and——"

"Oh!" she exclaimed quickly—and laid her hand impulsively on his sleeve. "Seriously? Tell me about it."

Peter shook his head.

"I thought it was bad enough at the time, but I didn't know my luck. I came through without any permanent disability. But I mentioned it only as incidental to what I wanted to tell you. The old pater died suddenly while I was in the hospital. They didn't tell me for a while. When I got back to England on sick leave, things were in rather a bad way. The pater had always been considered fairly well off, but it seems that he had backed a syndicate that had gone in for land and timber tracts out in Western Canada, and, as I believe they say in that country, was left holding the bag. It was rather a

crash—even the old place down in Sussex had to go. The mater had been dead for many years, I had no brothers or sisters, and so there was only myself. I think our old family solicitor took the loss of the property more to heart than I did. He and the pater had always been great pals. But the war was still on and it wasn't looking any too rosy just then, and I was going back, and, oh, well, I don't know—there was the Big Job to get on with, and, in the face of that, other things didn't seem to matter so much. I spent most of that leave signing papers, and when I went back to the front everything was in the solicitor's hands; but it was too soon, of course, to know just exactly where we stood." Peter paused, and stared for a moment at the slim, cloaked figure in the chair beside him. She was leaning forward, her elbows on her knees, her chin cupped in her hands, watching him intently. And suddenly he was sick at heart. What was the *end* of his story? "I'm afraid," he said, a sudden flatness in his tones, "that I'm taking a long time to explain how I came to be on a forsaken little trading schooner like the *Break O' Dawn.*"

"Please go on," she begged earnestly.

"I didn't see England again until after the war, when I came back and was demobilized," Peter continued. "I found things, the pater's affairs, I mean, or mine, then, if you like, about as bad as they could be. All that was left were the title deeds to what were apparently unsalable tracts of country out there in Canada. There was absolutely not a penny of available cash. On that night when I saw you in London, my worldly possessions, apart from a fairly extensive wardrobe that was still unimpaired, consisted of ten pounds and a few odd shillings—what was left of my officer's pay."

"Ten pounds!" she repeated almost under her breath. "But—but you said that for weeks after that you——"

"I sold the wardrobe," said Peter—and for the first time smiled with genuine mirth. "Oh, no; you mustn't think I walked the city treated as a homeless, friendless waif! I could have borrowed plenty of money—there were many old friends of the pater, the old solicitor himself included, who offered it to me. But—well, I—I refused it. Some of them offered me a situation. I refused that, too. The old chap—the solicitor, I mean, who had become my pater familias then—thought I was crazy, and told me so pretty plainly. I suppose, perhaps, I was. But the thought of a high stool in a London counting house was a bit more than I could stick. There's a lot been blamed on the restlessness of the fellows when they came back from the front—I fancy it's rather true. I had it—a pretty bad attack of it. It—it was that night in the theater that kept me for those extra weeks in London." Peter paused again—but this time abruptly, for she had drawn in her breath with a sudden little gasp. "Do—do you mind my saying that?" he asked, his lips curiously tight.

"No-o," she said slowly; "but I—I—oh, I don't know just how to say what I want to."

"Let me say it for you, then," said Peter, his voice a little out of control. "I think I know. It was an incident that you remembered—that at odd moments now and then recurred to you—that perhaps you wondered about a little, and perhaps wondered why you should wonder about it at all—and that, until tonight, you never thought would hold a sequel."

She fell to twisting the little signet ring on her finger again.

"No," she said, without looking up. "You—you are not entirely right. Sometimes, most times, it was like that, and yet there were times when I was strangely sure that there would be—a sequel."

"I was *always* sure," said Peter, and in his voice there flamed a sudden passion and an intense yearning that would not be denied. And then he would have taken the words back if he could, for he saw the color mount and sweep across her face, and they were not any longer man and maid, because he was—which?—Peter Blake, or Alec Dunn?

She made no answer.

Peter, in a curiously jerky way, pushed his hand across his eyes. His voice sounded strained, unnatural in his own ears, as he spoke again:

"I meant to take a year of it, two years of it, anywhere—everywhere. To—to find myself, if you know what I mean. If anything cropped up that appealed to me and offered an opportunity, it would solve the problem; if not, then, at the end, there was London and the high stool in the counting house. I went out to India in the forecastle of a P. & O. boat—worked my way out, of course. From there I went to Ceylon, then across to Singapore, and eventually, after a year of knocking about with short stretches of shore life here and there, I stranded on the beach at Apia. For the next six months, a bit of a beachcomber I am afraid, I batted about from one island to another—various jobs. I can't say that I had shaken myself down any, or had got much of a grip on my restlessness. Perhaps it was the last place in the world for a cure. Copra and natives! I don't know whether you know anything about the life in the islands, but——"

"Oh, but I do," she interrupted. "I think I quite

understand. It's rather deadly dull—on some of the smaller ones, isn't it? I used to go to one quite frequently."

"Did you?" Peter asked the question mechanically. He was coming to the *end* now—very close to it—and another question, whose demand for an answer tortured and tormented him, battered pitilessly at his brain. "Oh, yes, of course—you spoke of the island missions."

"No," she said, and shook her head, "I am afraid I was never quite so unselfishly devoted to the work as that." Her voice dropped suddenly. "No—there was a very old friend of father's, and a very, very dear friend of mine, my godfather, Mr. Murchison——"

"Murchison!" It came in a low, involuntary cry from Peter—like a sudden uncontrollable cry of hurt.

She drew back quickly, staring at him with suddenly startled eyes—and then quietly bent her head again.

"But, of course, you would know," she said, her voice shaken a little. "Everybody in this part of the world must know by now. Yes, it is the same Mr. Murchison who was murdered a number of weeks ago in his bungalow for the sake of a few pearls by a"—her hands had clenched on her lap, and her face was very white and set—"by a—I can't call him a man, for it was done in Daddy Tom's sleep—by a fiend named Peter Blake. It was father who offered the reward of five thousand pounds that you must have heard about." She sprang to her feet. "Oh, why—oh, how did the subject ever come up to-night?" she cried passionately. "I *hate* it so—and—and that name! It is all so abominable, and I—I—there is not a night that I have not prayed without pity, and without mercy, that they would catch him and bring him to his miserable end."

Peter did not move. His eyes were fixed on the deck. His hands, too, were clenched, clenched till the nails bit, but they were hidden in his pockets. Her father was the man who had offered the reward! She was the god-daughter of Tom Murchison! Daddy Tom! The bitterness in her voice! Tell her *now* he was Peter Blake, and expect her to believe his story and his unsupported word—to still hold her faith! Only the insane folly of a madman would dream of that! If what she meant to him meant his all, he had only one chance—just one. This answered the question for him. There was only one way—Captain Mumm's way. To go out and fight—fight for proof of his innocence—fight for his love. Yes! A thousand times, yes! Fight for his love—not destroy it here and now by ultra-quixotic notions of honor! He would tell her he was Peter Blake when he could stand foursquare before her and the world, his name vindicated—or else he would never tell her, for his search would have never known an end. Out amongst the outposts of civilization—far from her world! If he failed—well, it would be fate—because death would have intervened too soon.

Marion's voice broke in upon him—quiet, normal, full of interest again.

"Forgive me," she said as she reseated herself. "Please do not let us say anything more about it. Won't you go on with your story?"

Peter squared his shoulders.

"There is very little more to tell," he said—and wondered at the casualness of his voice. "After knocking about a bit more, I finally ended up with Captain Mumm on the *Break O' Dawn,* the trading schooner that went down out there to-night—and the rest you know."

"Yes," she said, "I—I see. And to-night—this is the sequel, isn't it? It seems so unbelievable, so——" She stopped abruptly. "What is that?" she asked quickly.

There was a sudden confusion of sounds aboard the ship—movement, an increased vibration, voices, footsteps along the deck.

Peter turned his face to hide the sudden tightening of his lips. His mind, in a torn, frenzied way, had already formulated the same question. What was it? Had they, after all, picked up Yar Lal or one of the others? He was Alec Dunn now. It meant disclosure. It was a beastly, horrible thing to measure his own safety against the life of one of those poor devils. Well, thank God, deep down within him he was conscious that he was doing nothing of the kind—it was the thrill at the turn of the card, the catch of the breath as fortune toyed with the stakes that were a man's all.

He made no effort to answer her question.

Footsteps came nearer; a voice called her name:

"Marion!"

"Yes, father!" she answered. "I'm here." And then, as two figures appeared around the corner of the deckhouse, she rose from her chair again. "What is all this sudden disturbance about? But first—you know Mr. Dunn; but I don't think Mr. Rand does. Mr. Dunn—Mr. Rand."

Peter found himself staring into the face of the man who had scowled at him at the gangway. He took the proffered hand, conscious of a certain sense of antipathy—conscious that it was mutual.

"By Jove," said Rand, with a quiet laugh, "I should have imagined that after your experiences to-night, Mr. Dunn, you'd have been tucked away in bed!"

"No," said Peter a little brusquely. "I'm none the worse for them."

"Then you must have the constitution of an ox, Mr. Dunn; though, after all, I'm not so sure"—Rand was laughing quietly again, but apparently now with a desire to make himself genial and agreeable—"since Miss Garth's company would be a panacea for any ill."

The words grated; and there was something in the other's intensely black eyes that belied the genuineness of the laugh that had accompanied them. Peter, by way of answer, dug his hands in his pockets. His mind was restless again—upon Yar Lal again.

"Mr. Rand should have been a Latin," said Marion with a smile. "But my question, father—what is the sudden commotion all about?"

"We're getting in the boats, and going on again," said Mr. Garth gravely.

"Going on!" Marion drew in her breath quickly. "But—but those poor men out there! It—it seems like desertion, doesn't it?"

It was Rand who answered.

"Desertion! Not at all!" he declared emphatically. "You mustn't think of anything like that! There wasn't a chance after the first half hour—and we've been here for hours now. A lot longer than any other ship would stay under the same conditions."

There was relief in Peter's mind—that somehow pricked his conscience because it *was* relief.

"I am afraid there is nothing else to do, Marion," said Mr. Garth heavily. "Captain Stone says that with the heavy swell that's running, even if any of them had managed to cling to a bit of floating wreckage, they would long ago have been out of our reach. As a matter of fact, for the last hour we've been run-

ning a little with the drift ourselves with that idea in mind, and as a last hope."

Peter standing close behind Marion saw her turn her head quickly away—but not before he had seen the blue eyes suddenly dim with tears.

"Yes—I—I suppose that is true," she said in a low voice. "But—but it is very terrible—and—and we are so safe here."

"It's one of those things that can't be helped, Miss Garth," said Rand. "Wouldn't you like a little turn along the deck? It will perhaps do you good."

Marion shook her head.

"No—thank you," she said. "I think I will go below now."

"I think we would better all turn in," said Mr. Garth soberly. "Come along."

They moved away along the deck, Mr. Garth and Rand leading. At the saloon entrance, Peter held out his hand—the two men had already gone inside.

"But aren't you coming in?" Marion asked in surprise.

"No," said Peter quietly. "Not yet. I couldn't sleep." He smiled quickly, disarmingly. "I'll keep the deck for a bit. My mind's too active, and it wouldn't be fair, you know, to toss around down there and keep old Mumm awake."

"I do not think that I shall sleep much, either," she said.

Her hand lay in his.

"But your thoughts and mine, though they may keep us both wakeful, will be far apart," he answered. "Yours on those poor chaps; mine selfishly on myself."

"Perhaps," she said; "but perhaps, too, they will find something in common."

His hand tightened a little on hers.

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"Well, for instance," she said—and suddenly her face lighted, and a gleam of laughter dawned in the blue eyes. "I shall be wondering a little perhaps—because I could never, never picture you on a high stool in a London counting house!"

She was gone.

Peter went slowly back along the deck, and came to the two chairs again in the shelter of the deckhouse, and sat down in his own chair again—and stared at the other. *Her* chair. She had been sitting there. Here out of all the world they had met again. And he was Alec Dunn.

Sleep! It was mockery to think of sleep.

He sat for the most part with his chin in his hands. Sometimes he moved slightly, utterly unconscious that he responded to a protest from cramped limbs overlong subjected to one position. It was quiet here—just the ship's noises, the steady throb of the engines, the wash of the sea. No one came near him; no one knew that he was there. The breeze eddying at times in gusts around the corners of the deckhouse was grateful, cool, upon his bare head.

A star came out—a single star—and hid itself coyly again behind a racing cloud. Rifts began to show through the drifting fog. Time was without measure.

He was cramped, his limbs angrily displeased at their abuse, when mechanically at last he rose and made his way below.

At the foot of the main companionway, a sailor—a quartermaster, probably, making the rounds—stepped aside, and touched his cap.

The ship's bell struck once. Was that half-past

twelve or half-past four? Peter could not be sure.

There was no light in the little alleyway. He fumbled for the knob of his stateroom door.

A voice called out sharply from within.

"Who's there?" demanded Captain Mumm, as though suddenly aroused from sleep.

And Peter answered:

"Alec Dunn."

CHAPTER XIII

THE PARIAH

PETER sat suddenly upright in bed. It did not seem to him that he had closed his eyes and yet he must have slept a little, for the first gray streaks of dawn were filtering in now through the cabin porthole. Captain Josephus Mumm, in the other bed, was already dangling his feet over the side, preparatory to jumping to the floor. Some one was knocking imperatively and repeatedly at the door.

"Blast it," shouted the little red-haired skipper irritably, "you don't need to wake the whole ship up! Who's there, and what's wanted?"

"It's Mr. Garth," a voice answered curtly. "Open the door!"

"Sounds like his dinner last night hadn't agreed with him!" grunted the little skipper, as he swung himself to the floor and opened the door.

Peter, still in bed, stared. The alleyway seemed to be literally packed with men. He rubbed his eyes in amazement. Besides Mr. Garth, he recognized the yacht's commander, Captain Stone, who, with Mr. Garth, had accompanied the *Break O' Dawn*'s skipper and himself to the cabin here last night; behind these two were Rand, with set, threatening face, and a bald-headed, grimy-faced man in a greasy white uniform, and, flanking the latter, still two more men, who, from their dress, were obviously two of the crew.

The yacht's commander and Mr. Garth brushed by the little skipper unceremoniously and came into the cabin. Captain Stone held a revolver in his hand; his face, eyes, and voice were hard.

"Get up, you!" he rasped at Peter. "And get your clothes on!"

"Of course," said Peter, a little helplessly, as he got out of bed. "But what's up?"

"Get your clothes on!" repeated the yacht's commander uncompromisingly.

The little red-haired skipper projected himself forward.

"Damme!" he exploded. "A bit thick, I call this! What's all the blooming row about?"

Humphrey Garth answered him.

"Perhaps you would better get your clothes on as well, Captain Mumm," he said in a repressed voice; "for, though I am sure you are not involved in this in any way, I do not imagine you will care to go back to bed again."

"That's as it may be!" retorted the little skipper ungraciously. "I'll tell you better when I know what you're driving at. However, if it'll please you, I'll dress. Looks like the mystery will keep, though, and no hurry about it, from the way you're hugging it to your bosoms!"

Peter's eyes, as he rapidly donned his clothes, swept the ring of unfriendly faces about him several times. Mr. Garth's face particularly seemed to stand out from the circle. It not only seemed to combine an intense bitterness with a smoldering fury, but it was almost ashen in its color. Twice he glanced at Captain Mumm. The little skipper was growling angrily under his breath, and, whether deliberately or not, refused to meet his, Peter's, eyes.

What did it mean? What was it all about? His first thought had been that, after all, some one *had* recognized him, knew him to be Peter Blake. But that wouldn't account for it—account for the grim

reticence on everybody's part. They would have accused him of it instantly the moment the door was opened, if that were all. Well—he was dressed now —why speculate about it? He looked steadily around the circle.

"I'm ready," he said.

The yacht's commander motioned toward the door.

Peter stepped out of the cabin, and found himself under the close escort of the two sailors. They did not actually lay hands on him, but for all practical purposes they might as well have taken a forcible grip upon his arms, for their shoulders brushed him on either side. Ahead of him, Humphrey Garth and Captain Stone led the way; behind were the others—the little red-haired skipper still grumbling, still irascibly demanding an explanation.

They turned out of the alleyway, went along aft, and descended the companionway leading to the deck below—and, halfway along the main alleyway on this deck, halted before a closed door.

The yacht's commander waved the two sailors to stand aside, moved a little to one side himself, as did Mr. Garth, and threw the door open.

For an instant Peter stood like a man stunned; and then instinctively, as the brutal and ghastly horror of what confronted him drove in upon his senses, he drew back a little.

No one else moved. No one spoke.

This was what it meant! *This* was why he had been brought here under guard! They were going to accuse him, for some impossible, incredible reason—of *this!* Was he mad—were they mad? He did not want to look any more, but he could not take his eyes from the scene. On the floor close to the bunk, and in front of a low writing table that was blotched with

huge crimson stains, lay the body of J. George Jaffray, Mr. Garth's secretary. The man's face was half hidden by an outflung arm, but the neck and the throat were bare—and *red*. On the floor, just beyond the reach of the outflung arm, as though it had fallen from nerveless fingers and rolled away a little, was a fountain pen.

Peter found his voice. It was quiet enough, but it was toneless.

"Why did you bring me here like this?" he asked.

"Come inside with me," said Humphrey Garth sternly. "Nothing has been touched, and you have a right to see everything as we found it."

Peter followed the other mechanically into the cabin. Mr. Garth pointed to a sheet of paper on the table—it was hideously mottled with blots that were not made with ink. From amongst these blots words fashioned themselves—scrawled words, some big, some little, as though written in frantic haste with a pen that slithered uncontrollably in fingers from which the strength had ebbed so rapidly away that their task had even been left unfinished.

The words seemed to Peter to sear themselves into his brain—and, curiously, to numb it; and somehow his mind refused to function, save that he found himself reading the words over and over again:

Dunn is Peter Blake. He did this. Give reward to——

Some one was standing behind him—reading the paper over his shoulder.

"God A'mighty!" It was the little red-haired skipper's voice, high pitched, strident, curiously like the cry of a frightened, bewildered child.

Humphrey Garth spoke—tersely, in a low, hard tone:

"We'll go on with this up in the lounge," he said.

Peter turned automatically and went out of the cabin. Again he found himself between the two sailors. A sense of unreality, a sense of horror and madness, of utter mental confusion was still upon him. The thing was impossible—a nightmare, literally a nightmare from which he would presently awake and probably find cold sweat beads from a tortured imagination clinging to his forehead. Damn these shuffling feet around him—and that insidious sound of murmuring voices! They were all talking now—not loudly—but all talking. Sepulchrally! Like people at a funeral who didn't give a damn about the corpse, but hushed their voices because it was the thing to do. He was the corpse—not that helpless thing back there. They were mouthing about him. Alec Dunn —Peter Blake—two murders!

No! This wouldn't do! He mustn't let himself down this way! He forced a certain grim composure upon himself. They had come up from the lower deck now, and were entering the yacht's lounge. He was marched along to the far end of the room, and left standing between the two sailors. The others had drawn a little apart, and were talking together in low tones—and then, abruptly, Humphrey Garth flung himself into a chair and motioned the others to sit down.

"Go on, Rand," he said. "I think there is no doubt but that, as you say, your experience among the natives as a sort of magistrate fits you better than any of the rest of us to conduct this miserable affair."

Rand, who alone had remained standing, nodded curtly, and advanced toward Peter.

Peter's eyes fixed on the other. The man's face was set, severe, almost judicial in its expression, but

there was something else lurking in the coal-black eyes, a glint of smug complacency, as though the man *relished* his task; and this, more than anything else, brought Peter a cold and steady composure—like the touch of a swordsman's blade as it engaged its opponent's, awakening every faculty to virility and action.

"My advice to you," said Rand brusquely, "is to make a clean breast of it. That poor chap down there evidently in some way recognized you—and paid for it with his life. Certainly, you answer in every detail to the published description of—shall we say?—yourself. It is merely a matter of keeping you under restraint—and you may be sure that we shall do that anyway—until we can confront you with some one who knows you personally and can establish your identity. If you are Peter Blake it is quite useless to deny it."

Peter's mind analyzed the statement in a swift and coldly unprejudiced way. The statement was merely axiomatic. It admitted no denial.

"Quite useless," he said calmly. "I *am* Peter Blake."

There was a sudden inarticulate exclamation from Humphrey Garth. Peter glanced in that direction. The man's hands were tightly clasped on the arms of his chair; he was leaning forward, his head sunk into his shoulders, crouched, like a man about to spring—but his face was composed, though ominously cold. Peter's eyes travelled to Captain Mumm. The little red-haired skipper was staring at the floor through eyes that were narrowed to slits and puckered into nests of wrinkles around the corners, while his fingers kept plucking aimlessly at the point of his tawny beard.

It was while a watch ticked, no longer than that, that Peter had glanced at these two; and then his eyes, passing over the yacht's commander and the man in the grimy uniform, held on the doorway at the far end of the lounge—and he gnawed at his lips to keep back a sudden cry. Marion was standing there, a slim, straight figure, motionless, her eyes fixed on his, her face a dead white with no vestige of color in it. Peter felt his own face grow white—and felt the blood surge madly the next instant into his cheeks. For a great while, an eternity it seemed to Peter, she stood there looking at him, and then the blue eyes seemed to grow darker as though horror were in their depths—and then she came quietly into the room. No one spoke. The men rose from their chairs and silently reseated themselves.

Peter for an instant closed his eyes. Here was that courtroom scene that had haunted him in his dreams —tortured him. It had come true—and the agony of it now was real. There was no judge, no jury—but she was here—at his trial. This was his trial. There would be another, of course, because there was nothing legal about this one; but he stood as surely before her now in the prisoner's dock answering to the charge of murder as though it were in a panelled courtroom, and gowned and bewigged functionaries impressively upheld the majesty of the law. But in those dreams he had never pictured this—that he should already have damned and convicted himself in her eyes because he had lied to her!

"So!" said Rand shortly. "You admit you are Peter Blake. I congratulate you on your intelligence. Now"—he held up the blood-stained sheet of paper with the scrawled writing upon it—"what have you to say to this?"

Was she watching him? Peter was fighting for his composure once more—she had robbed him of it. He dared not look at her.

"I know nothing about it," he said slowly. "I know nothing about Mr. Jaffray's murder."

"Or—being Peter Blake—about the murder of Mr. Murchison, either, I suppose!" said Rand tartly. "You had nothing to do with that, either?"

"No," said Peter, steadily now. "I had nothing to do with that, either."

"Which, of course, accounts for the fact that you ran away, and reappeared again—as Alec Dunn," Rand sneered contemptuously.

A slow flush mounted to Peter's face. The man's antagonism was vicious. He took a step forward—and found himself held back by the two men at his side.

"Go on!" he said, a rush of passion in his voice. "Without hearing anything I might have to say about that night at Mr. Murchison's—go on, and make it appear as ugly as you can!"

"There is nothing uglier than cold-blooded and wanton murder," snapped Rand. "At the present time, we are not interested in *your* account of that night. I have no doubt you have a specious tale to tell, but the positive evidence of your guilt is in the hands of the authorities, and that matter is entirely outside our province. What we are concerned with, is what has happened here amongst us on board this ship—another murder equally as brutal as the first, and of which you are accused, this time by the murdered man himself. You deny all knowledge of it?"

"I have already answered that question," said Peter hoarsely. "I will not answer it again."

"It is your right to refuse to answer any question,"

said Rand, a sudden suavity in his tones, "though I do not think it will matter very much whether you exercise that right or not. There are others who are quite willing to tell what they know, and I think it is only fair to warn you that we had already talked this over before we went to your cabin. We will begin with the chief engineer—no, don't stand up, Mr. MacPherson"—as the man in the greasy uniform rose from his chair—"just tell us how and when you came to find Mr. Jaffray."

"We'd a bit o' trouble in the engine room last night wi' one o' the pumps," said the chief engineer gruffly. "And I was up near all the night wi' it. When I went back to my room it was after five. Mr. Jaffray's room is alongside o' mine, and as I came along the alleyway I saw a light coming out through the fretwork over the top of his door. I thought it was queer at that hour, so I knocked on the door, and, getting no answer, and finding the door wasn't locked, I went in."

Mr. MacPherson paused, and passed the palm of his hand over his bald head nervously once or twice.

"I dinna like to talk o' it," he said huskily. "What I saw, ye've seen for yourselves. Mr. Jaffray was lying like that on the floor, and for a minute I was fair sick with the sight of it. Then I saw that paper about it being Peter Blake, and about the reward, and I stood there a bit, and it was like something had me by the throat choking me. Mr. Jaffray was keen on that reward, and him and me had talked it over many a time, and I'll no say behind a man's back—meaning Mr. Garth here—what I wouldn't say to his face, which is, that I'd told Mr. Jaffray that no man, rich though he might be, had the right to put temptation in any one's way with all that money, and that

bloody murder would come of it—but I never thought it would be yon poor fellow himself. When I got myself together I shut the door behind me and went and roused up Captain Stone. That's all I can tell ye."

Rand turned to Peter again.

"You also have the right to *ask* any question you like," he said, clipping off his words unpleasantly.

Peter eyed the other levelly for a moment. Of a sudden he cared nothing for this new accusation, for the critical position in which he stood—something else more vital by far to him had superseded all that. What was Marion to this man? What had prompted that scowl at the gangway last night? What was prompting the pointed and personal animosity of the other now?

"Thank you—for tossing the dog a bone!" said Peter evenly.

Rand acknowledged the remark with an irritating shrug of his shoulders.

"Very well; we will go on, then," he said. He pointed to one of the two men at Peter's side. "What is your name? Jenkins, isn't it? Yes! Well, Jenkins, tell us when and where you last saw this man, Blake."

The man stepped slightly forward.

"At the foot of the main companionway this morning, sir, when I was making rounds," he said. "The ship's bell had just gone half-past four."

"Very good, that will do, Jenkins," said Rand. "Well"—harshly—"do you dispute this—Blake?"

"It is perfectly true," said Peter. "I do not recognize Jenkins; but, for that matter, I would be unable to recognize the man I met there. I have no doubt it was Jenkins."

"I have no doubt about it, either!" said Rand caustically. He swung half around to the little audience behind him. "Perhaps Captain Mumm will be able to help us here. As I understand it, Mr. Jaffray went to your cabin last night on Mr. Garth's instructions. Blake was there with you. Shortly after Jaffray left, Blake went up on deck. Is that correct?"

The little red-haired skipper had straightened in his chair, and was scowling furiously.

"Yes," he said.

"What time did Blake come back?"

"I dunno," said Captain Josephus Mumm.

"You don't know! What did you do in the meantime?"

"I went to bed," growled the little man. "What d'ye think I did?"

"Sleep?" asked Rand quickly.

"Yes," said Captain Mumm.

"What awakened you?"

"Well," said Captain Mumm, after a moment, "I heard some one at the door."

"Blake, here?"

"Yes."

"He came into the cabin—and perhaps went to bed—since we found him there?"

"Yes."

"What time was that?"

"I dunno."

"Could it have been the hour Jenkins mentioned —half-past four?"

"I dunno." Captain Mumm's voice, like his jaws, was growing more and more ferocious.

"Being a sailor," said Rand softly, "and being accustomed to sleeping with, as I believe the saying is, one eye open, do you think Blake could have come

in and gone out again without you knowing it—that is, between the time he left to go on deck, and the time you say you heard him at the door?"

"I dunno." Captain Mumm bit the word off, and flung it at the other.

"We appear to have a rather unwilling witness," observed Rand composedly. "Let me ask you something else. In view of Mr. Jaffray's written statement"—he held up the blood-stained sheet of paper again—"did anything transpire while the three of you were together in your cabin that would indicate he had any suspicion at that time that this man here was Peter Blake?"

Captain Mumm stared for an instant uncertainly at the other, and for the first time shifted a little uneasily in his chair.

"Damn it!" he exploded, "I'd like to know what right you've got to ask all these questions! Eh? What?"

"None whatever except that of common consent," replied Rand blandly; "and the fact that it is at the request of both the owner and the captain of this vessel—the latter of whom, as none should know better than yourself, is invested with rather wide legal powers while at sea. Shall I repeat my question?"

Captain Mumm, now obviously uncomfortable, was wriggling in his chair. His eyes, across the room, met Peter's for an instant in a sort of helpless way.

"Suit yourself!" he blurted out. "I—I ain't going to answer it."

"I will answer it," said Peter quietly. "Jaffray seemed to have an idea that Captain Mumm's experience in the islands would be a valuable help in securing that five thousand pounds' reward. He asked for Captain Mumm's advice, and during the course

of the conversation, by way of instancing the difficulty of running a man down with nothing but a description to work on, pointed out that I, as he said hundreds of other men would, answered perfectly to that description."

There was a moment's silence in the room. Peter smiled a little wanly. They were all staring at him —all except Marion. He was looking at her now for the first time since she had come into the lounge. She was a very rigid little figure in a great armchair. Her head was bent forward, her eyes fixed on the floor, where, with the toe of one small white shoe, she was tracing the pattern of the rug. Her face was set, the corners of her mouth drawn in hard, straight lines. She seemed conscious of his scrutiny now, for her eyes lifted, met his with a blank stare, and, passing by him, fixed intently upon Rand.

Rand broke the silence with a short laugh.

"Very kind of you, Blake—to let Captain Mumm out!" he said acidly. "I hope he appreciates it. But in view of his attitude, his rather *friendly* attitude toward you, and the fact that, your identity now being established, we know you ran away from Murchison's island only a comparatively short time ago, whereas Captain Mumm had given us the impression that you were an old hand with him on his schooner, I think I am justified in asking Captain Mumm if he was not perfectly well aware that it was Peter Blake, and not Alec Dunn, who came aboard here with him last night?"

Peter drew himself a little more erect, as though his muscles had suddenly become tense. It was the one question that, though he had expected it to come sooner or later, he dreaded the most. Somehow, if he lied for it, he must keep Captain Mumm out of

what, in the eyes of the law at least, was likely to prove a nasty complication for the little red-haired skipper.

"I'll answer that too," he said as quietly as before. "Captain Mumm had no——"

"Blast it!" roared the little red-haired man, jumping suddenly to his feet. "You hold your tongue, Peter! I can look out for myself." He shook his fist belligerently at Rand. "If you want to know it, I did! And what's more, it was me that got him to say he was Alec Dunn—and be damned to you!"

"So!" drawled Rand coolly. "Well, I thought so! And may I ask why you have connived at his escape so far?"

"Yes—you may!" shouted Captain Josephus Mumm furiously. "And that, I'll answer! I picked him up sick in a native hut on Malitua. And I figured he was Peter Blake on account of a motor boat called the *Marion* that was in the lagoon, and which, according to the police notice I'd read in Fiji, belonged to Murchison. And Peter here admitted he was Blake, and I took him aboard the *Break O' Dawn,* thinking I had a murderer that was badly wanted, even though I hadn't found any of the pearls that the murder was supposed to have been done for. And I was making for Sydney, and spending that five thousand pounds' reward every time I thought of it, and gloating over my blooming luck, when you ran us down last night."

"I see," said Rand with an acrimonious smile. "But that hardly agrees with the fact that you told us his name was Alec Dunn."

"No; it don't!" snarled the little skipper. "But the reason he came aboard here as Alec Dunn is because he saved my life out there in the water last

night, when he could have let me go to Davy Jones and no one left to say he was Peter Blake; and a man who'll do that ain't no murderer—and Captain Josephus Mumm, by God, I'll have you know, ain't a man who doesn't pay his debts!"

"Which, of course, justifies you," said Rand smoothly, "in being an accomplice, after the fact—to murder. I hope, for your sake, the law will take as lenient a view of it as you do yourself."

"The law be damned!" Captain Josephus Mumm's face was red with rage. "You can hope what you like!"

Humphrey Garth spoke suddenly.

"It is rather obvious, I think," he said quietly, "that Captain Mumm had nothing whatever to do either with Tom Murchison or this affair here, and dastardly as this man Blake showed himself to be in the murder of Tom Murchison, and, I am agreed, in this one of Jaffray too, I cannot in my heart blame Captain Mumm for attempting to protect a man who has, according to his story, saved his life. I am, I confess, a little surprised that a man as brutal and vicious as Blake should have shown so much courage and decency; but, under the circumstances, I am inclined to believe that, in spite of the law, I should have done as Captain Mumm has done."

Rand nodded his head.

"Even the worst of them have been known to exhibit a certain animal courage at times," he said bluntly; "but I have never known that running away and changing one's name through fear of consequences was the attitude of a brave man—and that's what this man has done. I rather agree with you, though, about Captain Mumm, in spite of what I have said. I was only endeavoring to bring out all the

light I could upon the affair. I hope he has taken no offense."

The little red-haired skipper grunted uncompromisingly.

"Whether I have or whether I haven't, I ain't going to answer no more of your questions!"

"I have no more questions to ask," said Rand with a faint smile. He swung on Peter. "We come back to you now, I think," he said harshly. "At half-past eleven last night, at which time it is known that Mr. Jaffray was still alive, you were on deck with some of us, myself amongst others. You did not come below with us then. I think it is fairly evident from Captain Mumm's rather—er—indirect replies that you did not go back to your cabin until, say, half-past four, at which hour Jenkins saw you at the foot of the main companionway. In any case, perhaps you will tell us where you were between half-past eleven and half-past four?"

They were all staring at him again—no, not all—two of them weren't. The little red-haired skipper wasn't—Marion wasn't. The little red-haired skipper was hunched in his chair, and glaring again at Rand. Marion was sitting quite still, her eyes half closed, looking straight ahead of her across the lounge; the little mouth was firmly closed, the hard, straight lines at the corners still unrelaxed.

"I was on deck," said Peter.

"All the time?"

"Yes."

"What were you doing there?"

"Nothing," Peter answered. "Sitting there behind the deckhouse."

"What!" ejaculated Rand. He laughed suddenly, contemptuously. "Do you mean to tell us that you sat

there for *five hours* on a foggy and rather unpleasant night, when, after the experiences you had been through, the normal thing for any man to do, unless there was some very strong incentive to do otherwise, was to seek rest and sleep? Do you expect us to believe so paltry and so unbelievable an explanation as that?"

"Whether you believe it or not," said Peter, a curious indifference in his voice now, "it is true. I sat in that chair, as it appears now, though I did not realize it at the time, for five hours."

"Good God!" murmured Rand sarcastically. He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, is there anything else you want to say?"

"Yes," said Peter coldly, "when you are quite through."

"I'm quite through," returned Rand curtly. "You have made that rather obvious yourself, haven't you?"

Peter pointed to the blood-stained sheet of paper that Rand still held.

"That paper," he said quietly; "your claim is that it was written by Mr. Jaffray?"

"Claim!" Rand puckered his brows in a puzzled fashion. "Who else could have written it?"

"That is not what I asked you," said Peter sharply.

"Ah, I see!" said Rand ironically. "The handwriting expert idea! You dispute the handwriting?"

"I had not thought of that," Peter answered icily. "Will you answer my question?"

"It hardly requires one. Certainly, we do not question for an instant that Mr. Jaffray wrote this."

"Then," said Peter, "perhaps you will tell me how, after I had gone into that cabin and murdered Mr. Jaffray, a dead man was able to write, not only what

is on that paper you have there, but anything at all?"

"You've hit it, my lad!" The words came with brisk ferocity from the little red-haired skipper. "Let him take a turn and answer that!"

No one else for a moment said anything—nor, so far as Peter could see, had his question, which had been thudding at his brain from almost the first moment he had read the scrawled accusation which to him had seemed to confute itself even to the point of absurdity, made any impression on anybody in the room except Captain Mumm.

Rand was smiling in a sort of pityingly supercilious way.

"It is only fair to ourselves to say that the same question suggested itself to us when the crime was discovered," he drawled. "It is a question, however, that, under the circumstances, will probably never be answered except by conjecture. That he did write it, however, is certain. The fact that his statement that you are Peter Blake proves to be true, at once gives authority to the writing, and supplies the motive for the murder. He found out you were Peter Blake, and, from what he wrote on this paper, the inference is that you killed him to escape exposure and capture. How he came to write those words is, as I have already said, a matter of conjecture; but it seems to us that there is at least one very simple and practical theory which would explain it. If it was you who killed him, you know better than we do whether the light was left burning or not. It doesn't matter very much. The murderer left Jaffray for dead. Jaffray revived for perhaps a few moments—it could hardly have been more. If the light had been turned out, there was an electric switch at the head of his bunk. He could reach that; but he had not the strength to

reach the bell-push which was across the cabin near the door. He couldn't give the alarm; he couldn't *cry* out—you know why—his throat was too fiendishly cut. He pulled or dragged himself from the bunk, managed to scrawl the few words on this paper, and, before he could finish, collapsed on the floor."

Peter pushed his hand across his eyes. The explanation was plausible, simple and believable. A jury would believe it—just as a jury would believe the cleverly planted evidence against him in the case of Murchison—just as these people in the room here believed it all. A reaction came, unnerving, sweeping aside composure, driving in upon him a sense of his helplessness and impotence. His mind attempted to wrestle anew with the problem, but as though in utter weariness refused to do anything but ask and keep on asking, and repeat, and repeat over again the same question: In whose place was he standing here?

He heard them talking, gathered together in a little group now; he was conscious that Marion, without a glance in his direction, had risen from her chair and had left the lounge; but his mind went on repeating, like some poor parrot obsessed with the only words it knew, the question:

In whose place was he standing here?

The voice of the yacht's commander, raised in gruff, but sober tones, reached him now:

"There is no question whatever in my mind as to his guilt, and I should not hesitate to put him under arrest for Jaffray's murder in any case; but, as Peter Blake, he is already wanted by the police for the murder of Mr. Murchison, anyway. We will wireless or radio a full report at once to the authorities and ask for instructions; and meanwhile, of course, we will keep him under lock and key." He stepped forward

toward Peter. "You understand, Blake?" he said sternly. "You will be locked up until we can hand you over to the police!"

A faint flush dyed Peter's cheeks—but he made no answer. There was no answer to make.

The yacht's commander nodded curtly to the two sailors.

"Take him away!" he ordered.

CHAPTER XIV

TURMOIL

MARION stood at the yacht's rail. She held her face up to the breeze, unconscious that it took liberties with truant wisps of hair, and, in the sunlight of the new morning, tossed them here and there like little glinting, golden flurries across her forehead and about her ears. She threw her head far back, inviting the coolness of the breeze upon her bare throat—it had been stifling in the lounge there, and it had seemed at the last that she could not breathe.

She clung to the rail with both her hands, clung to it desperately—and yet the sea was smooth, tranquil this morning, smiling. Tranquil! Smiling! There seemed to be something horribly incongruous in that—that for the first time since they had left Sydney the sea and all nature should awake in its most joyous and happy mood. There seemed to be a brutal callousness about the frolicking, dancing ripples at play, as they chased each other with carefree abandon, and, like laughter, broke into tiny crests of purling foam—for last night they had been ugly, rolling swells that had swept men to their deaths. Yesterday the sun had been veiled in fog, and all the day had been gray and somber; and this morning a ghastly and inhuman thing had happened, a crime that sickened the hearts of men, that cried to God for vengeance, and from the sight of which one shrank away—and the sun, already well above the horizon rim, was mounting blithely to take its place in a cloudless, perfect sky!

Last night there had come aboard a man—strangely—out of the very ocean—bringing strange stirrings of memories—wonderings. A man with high head and sun-tanned face, who was big with the brawn of young manhood, dependable in his strength—a clean man. To-day he was a wretched weakling, a leper amongst his fellows, a pariah, a man whose hands were dirty with the foulest of all dirt—a murderer! Last night he had been Alec Dunn. To-day he was Peter Blake.

Yesterday nature had sulked, sullen and morose, unlovely, baleful in her ill-tempered mood. To-day, as though the very horror of the night had appeased her and had coaxed her from her waywardness, she was all smiles and merriment.

A step sounded along the deck. Marion glanced in that direction—and immediately faced seaward again. It was Herman Rand. It was over, then—that miserable, sordid business in the lounge. She did not want to talk to Rand. She wished he were not coming. She had taken an unreasonable dislike to the man for the part he had just played. It *was* unreasonable, of course. She did not pretend to herself that it was anything else. Somebody had to ask all those questions, and they couldn't be considerate questions, nor could consideration be unduly shown to the one to whom they were put.

He had reached her side.

"I saw you come along the deck here, Miss Garth," he said quietly, "and I thought perhaps you would like to know what the decision has been. Captain Stone has put Blake under arrest, and is having him locked up somewhere aft."

Marion nodded her head. She did not look up.

Rand drummed for a moment on the teakwood rail.

"I didn't care particularly for my rôle of chief inquisitor in there—though I suggested it myself," he said abruptly. "I didn't think you quite approved of it, either. I was afraid from your expression once or twice that you didn't. I don't think I should have taken it on except for one reason, and I want you to know—I think you should know—what that reason was. It was on your account, Miss Garth."

"On my account!" Marion turned sharply in surprise. "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Rand."

He leaned a little toward her, smiling in a sober way.

"I wanted to save you from the possibility of being asked any questions," he said simply. "Questions that I did not think you would care to answer."

Marion's blue eyes widened—a pucker came between them. She was suddenly ill at ease, suddenly a little frightened.

"Questions that I would not care to answer!" She forced an incredulous smile. "Really, Mr. Rand, that is rather a strange thing to say!"

"I do not like my rôle now," he said gravely. "But I want you to believe me when I say that I am thinking only of you. You told me—forgive me, I would not willingly recall anything that would cause you either pain or embarrassment—you told me that there —that there was no one else."

She drew back a step, her face a little white.

"Well?" She had meant the word to come coldly, perhaps a little forbiddingly from her lips; it came, instead, full of a strange suspense.

"I was standing beside you when Blake came aboard last night," Rand said slowly. "I don't think anybody else saw. I am sure nobody else did. But —forgive me again—there was more than mere *rec-*

ognition in the way you two looked at each other."

She turned her head to stare out over the sea again, gripping the rail with tightly clenched hands. He had seen. She had not thought anybody had seen. She forced herself to speak.

"Yes?" she demanded.

Rand's voice was very low as he answered:

"He said his name was Alec Dunn."

Marion did not move now. Something of great pain, of great hurt was throbbing in her head, beating with physical blows, it seemed, at her temples. Emotions that she could not define came surging upon her, confusing her. She hated the thought that this man was, as it were, holding something over her; she hated the thought that her actions should be misunderstood; and, strangely, most curiously of all, she hated the thought that this man should have intruded upon something that, somehow—she could not quite define that either—was a very intimate thing in her life. True it was a broken, shattered thing now, a source of intense and bitter pain, and bitter amazement and horror—but perhaps for that very reason more inviolate in its intimacy, as something that belonged to herself alone. And then anger came, burning, hot. Those last words of his were an indictment. They indicated her as an accomplice; they accused her of *love* for this man who had murdered—Daddy Tom.

"What right have you to say this to me?" she cried out sharply. "What right have you to couple that man and my statement in such a way as to intimate that it disproves what I said when I told you there was no one else?"

The man's face was curiously tense. The black eyes seemed to bore into her, as though they would be

denied nothing that was passing in her mind; but his voice reached her in quiet, dispassionate tones.

"Miss Garth, aren't you a little upset? I was only trying to help. I tried to help this morning. What other answer, what other conclusion could I, or any one in my place, have arrived at? You knew him *before* he was Alec Dunn, for he has only been Alec Dunn since he was a fugitive, and you couldn't possibly have seen him during that time. Before he was Alec Dunn, he was Peter Blake, and you knew it was Peter Blake who had murdered Mr. Murchison. It must have been a very strong motive indeed that would have kept your lips closed last night, and I could think, I can think now, of only one—the strongest of all—that when you answered me, there *was* some one else—that you cared for him."

"And do you mean," demanded Marion, and there was a sort of wild incredulity in her voice now, "that all this time, from the moment we heard Mr. Murchison had been murdered, I knew this Peter Blake, and that—that I loved him? Do you mean that until last night I had been indirectly shielding the man who killed my godfather, my dearest friend; and that last night I did so in so actual and direct a way that I kept his real identity from becoming known?"

"What else could I think?" Rand leaned forward earnestly. "Please don't be angry, Miss Garth. I've been miserable enough over this myself. From the moment we found poor Jaffray and that paper, I could think of nothing else. I told you that I forced the rôle of inquisitor upon myself. I know I did not show *him* much mercy. But won't you try and understand me? I do not think for a moment you could love him now, or that you loved him last night, or that you loved him from the instant you knew he had killed

Mr. Murchison; but that the love that once had been had left in its train a certain loyalty which in itself must have been misery for you—and last night most miserable of all when you were suddenly and unexpectedly faced with so brutal a situation."

"But my father—somebody—would have known that I was acquainted with Peter Blake under such circumstances," Marion said instantly.

Rand nodded his head in a slow, distressed way.

"Yes," he admitted. "That was what I didn't understand."

"Unless," said Marion tersely, "it was a clandestine affair!"

Rand turned away for a moment. His voice was hoarse when he spoke again.

"You are hardly fair, are you, Miss Garth?"

A sudden contrition came upon her. Last night this man, who so strangely at times attracted her, and at others so strangely repelled her, had asked her to be his wife.

"No, perhaps I'm not—perhaps I haven't been," she said more quietly. "And after what you said last night, and in view of what has happened since, you have really, I suppose, the right to know. Very well, I will tell you, then. When that man came aboard last night I did not know his name, I did not know who he was—but it is true that I had seen him before. Two years ago in London we met under rather—rather peculiar circumstances. We did not speak to each other then, we did not know each other. I did not know who he was, where he came from, where he went; I did not know his name, nor did he know mine. I never saw him again, until last night when I—I recognized him as he stood there on the deck."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Rand fervently.

Marion stared.

"Why do you say that?" she asked swiftly.

"For several reasons," Rand answered—and his face broke into a sudden smile. "But, of course, you see them for yourself. That the man's shame, and disgrace, and inhuman fiendishness can have no personal meaning for you; and that—but do I need to tell you this, Miss Garth, even though last night you gave me little cause to hope?—that, selfish as it may sound, I still know that there is—no one else."

Marion did not answer. The pucker had come between her eyes again. It was strange—very strange—and inconsistent—a woman's inconsistency perhaps. His voice was grave, measured, full of sincerity; his face was earnest, full of sincerity—and yet somehow, she was conscious of insincerity. What was it? Was it that, at heart, he did not believe her, and that his apparent sincerity was merely the veneer of conventional politeness? And if it were—or if it were something else—or if she were entirely wrong and was doing him a flagrant injustice? Well, in any case, she did not want to think any more about it now—not now. She shrank from anything that could in any way add to a mental turmoil, already almost unendurable, induced by the dismal and naked horror of what had happened during the last few hours.

Rand spoke again—but now in quite casual tones.

"Here's Lahat Khan," he said. "To announce breakfast, I suppose."

Marion looked up. The immaculate, white-garbed steward stood before her, bowing and smiling his perpetual smile.

"Breakfast, Miss Garth—and Mr. Rand, sir," smiled Lahat Khan.

Marion waved the man away. Breakfast! Yes, of course, they had all been up hours before breakfast this morning. There hadn't been any bugle as usual summoning them to breakfast. That was because of—of—well, it would have made an unseemly sound. But there was to be breakfast . . . one ate just the same . . . merely the bugle . . .

She pushed the wind-swept hair away from her forehead nervously.

"Please go down, Mr. Rand," she said. "I will be there presently."

But Marion did not go to breakfast.

That morning she spent lying on her bed in her stateroom, desirous of nothing so much as to be left alone. And the hours passed for her, not in cycles of minutes and seconds, but in cycles, recurring cycles, of mental gropings, as though, finding herself lost in some maze of many turnings, a maze of black and ugly darkness, a maze inhabited by repulsive and terrifying things whose presence she could feel but could not see, she strove wildly to find her way out into the sunlight and freedom again.

Peter Blake! Peter Blake! Peter Blake! *He* was Peter Blake! Daddy Tom's face came and smiled at her—and she turned and buried her face in her pillow—and she grew hard, and merciless and bitter. And then Peter's face came—and the memory of that night in London; and then the great, splendid, physical bigness of the man as he had stood last night on the deck, the wet clothes modelling him as some sculptor might have modelled a statue that for all time should represent the perfect development of manhood. And she wished she might have heard *his* story of that night at Daddy Tom's. And then her hands clenched, and she despised herself because she had not

already crushed and thrown aside that *something,* that something that this, she had called it a sequel last night, had awakened in her, that something which stirred within her—and—hurt so cruelly. Why should she want to hear his story? He had been so plausible last night—and yet he had lied to her! Herman Rand was right in what he had said in the lounge. Peter Blake would have a specious story ready; but the law already had the evidence that stamped him beyond any doubt, no matter how much one might want to doubt, as being the guilty man. And she remembered what Captain Mumm had said about the finding of the motor boat—*the Marion*—named after her. It brought a broken cry from her: "Oh, Daddy, Daddy Tom!" The finding of that boat confirmed the evidence, left no loophole. A high stool in a London counting house! The phrase didn't mean anything in this mad, battling confusion of her thoughts; it simply intruded itself, forced itself in upon her. But it was a strange thing for a murderer to say. It seemed to be so healthy and so clean. Why had Herman Rand brought those words of hers back to her? *"No one else."* Last night seemed to have spanned those two years since that night in London as though they were but yesterday. She did not know, dared not ask herself now, what it meant. Last night she had been very strangely happy. Suppose —suppose that Jaffray had not found out, and to-day Peter Blake had still been Alec Dunn, and for the to-morrow and the to-morrows, and they had been together, and that strange happiness of last night had—— She sat up on the edge of her bed clasping her temples fiercely with her hands. It was abominable! Why was she letting her thoughts run mad like this? What was she trying to say?—that what

Jaffray had paid for with his life had saved her from what ultimately——

The cycle again. Over and over again . . .

As out of some world far removed from her, she heard the ship's bell. One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight. Noon. Twelve o'clock.

A knock came at her door. She heard her father's voice, and in answer to her response he came into the stateroom.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, she looked at him. His face was tired, very stern.

He placed an arm affectionately around her shoulders.

"Better, Marion?" he asked gently.

"Yes," she said.

"We have communicated with Sydney," he said, "but have as yet received no definite instructions. I have offered to send the *Isis* back with Blake while we are at Rand's; but the authorities may prefer to send for him themselves. Poor Jaffray, we shall, of course, bury him here at sea."

Marion turned her head away.

"I don't want to talk about it, father—do you mind?" she said dully.

"I don't want to, either," said Humphrey Garth, a sudden gruffness in his voice. "I'm not sure I could trust myself. I thought, though, you should know in general what has been done." He patted her shoulder again. "Better come up on deck now, Marion, for a little fresh air before lunch. It will do you good."

She nodded her head.

"Yes," she said, "I will in a few minutes."

Her father went out.

Marion rose, bathed a face which in the mirror looked, like her father's, very tired and drawn, re-

arranged her hair, and went slowly from her stateroom. At the head of the main companionway she passed one of the yacht's officers posting the vessel's run and position on the little baize notice board. She nodded pleasantly, and went out on deck. Up forward, her father, Herman Rand, and the yacht's commander were grouped under the bridge talking earnestly.

She had no desire to talk, much less to join in a discussion the topic of which could only be the one topic that for the moment she wanted to forget. She slipped around unseen to the other side of the deck, and began to walk slowly up and down. Suddenly she stood still. Just aft of her was the lounge, the deck windows open. A voice, low, but very clear, the tenor notes wonderfully true and sweet, reached her in some lilting native song. Lahat Khan! The singing steward!

Her lips pursed. The man was always singing! She had never attempted to repress him before; indeed, she had rather enjoyed it—but singing to-day aboard the *Isis* seemed unbearably out of place. She went hastily inside to reprove the man. At the entrance to the lounge she paused. The song had ceased, and Lahat Khan was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XV

THE CABIN ON THE LOWER DECK

A DAY and a night, and another day had gone, and now it was the short twilight of the tropics, already near its close. Peter Blake paced up and down the narrow confines of a small cabin that, from a storeroom of some sort, had been metamorphosed into a cabin cell. Three steps one way—three steps the other. There had been hours of this—two days of it—with respites only when he flung himself uncomfortably, restlessly, down upon his bunk. But no respite of mind from a refrain, a jangling refrain that obsessed his brain and tortured him and would not cease and would not be driven away:

In whose place was he standing here?

And then came the probings, seeking to answer that question—like a surgeon's probe searching in raw flesh when the nerves lay bare and the mercy of an anesthetic was denied. And the beginning of it was a very long time ago—on a night when a man had laughed and another man had died.

Was there any connection between that night on Murchison's island, and that night here when, with the same vicious craftiness, and the same diabolical callousness that had characterized the first murder, a second murder had been committed and laid at his door?

Was the second murder a corollary of the first? How could it be?—except that, in so far as he was concerned, the discovery that he was Peter Blake had

pointed him out as a natural scapegoat ready to hand, and he had been made use of as such.

Who killed Tom Murchison? The answer never varied. It was the one question his tormented brain always answered: A man who laughed, together with another man who was a white man—and others who were not white men, but who did the bidding of the other two.

A hundred other questions had no answers at all.

Who murdered J. George Jaffray? Why was Jaffray murdered? How did Jaffray know, how had Jaffray found out that he, Peter Blake, was—Peter Blake? *Did* Jaffray know?

Who wrote the accusation that had been found in Jaffray's cabin?

Was Rand's theory or explanation tenable? Physically, it was possible. But if Jaffray had not been killed outright and was still able to write at all, Jaffray surely knew that he, Peter Blake, was not his assailant. Why then should Jaffray, dying, make a false accusation that would shield and give immunity to his own murderer? Incredible! But *did* Jaffray really know who had attacked him? Suppose the crime had been committed in the dark, that the murderer, in some way, by voice, or act, or suggestion, intentionally impersonating Peter Blake, had caused Jaffray to believe that it *was* Peter Blake? Jaffray, dying, his brain functioning abnormally in its last agony, might have accepted the impression, that was perhaps cunningly being thrust upon it—the murderer for instance, whispering: "So I answer to Peter Blake's description, do I? Well, I *am* Peter Blake!" That would have done it. But that presupposed that Jaffray had spoken of the resemblance to some one else besides Captain Mumm and himself, Peter Blake,

in the cabin the night before last. Well, why not? It would have been natural enough. But to whom? No one had come forward to say that Jaffray had done anything of the kind. But, granting this theory, what was the actual murderer's reason for impersonating Peter Blake? To shift the crime from his own shoulders, of course! Yes, of course! But did it go any farther? The reward of five thousand pounds didn't enter into it, did it? Jaffray, dead, couldn't claim the reward. How could the murderer step forward and claim it? Quite absurd! Nevertheless Jaffray's reference to the reward on that paper was the strongest evidence that Jaffray himself *had* written it. On the other hand it was the cleverest thing the murderer could have done in order to stamp that dying statement as genuine. But if Jaffray knew that Alec Dunn was Peter Blake, why had he waited until he was being murdered to disclose the fact? Why hadn't he promptly gone to Mr. Garth, to Captain Stone, to anybody in authority on board, and disclosed that fact? Had he *ever* found out? Was it only the murderer who had found out and who had written that paper? Or was it the murderer who, in his impersonation of Peter Blake to shift the crime from his own shoulders, had made Jaffray believe he was being attacked by Peter Blake, and Jaffray then, as Rand had suggested, had managed to reach the table and scrawl those words?

Somebody had discovered that Alec Dunn was Peter Blake—whether Jaffray, or the man who had killed Jaffray. But how had that discovery been made? How? How? And *who* had made it?

And *why* had Jaffray been killed? What was the motive? What was the reason? Why? *Why* had Jaffray been murdered? Humphrey Garth knew,

Marion knew, all the world would know why by now! How could there be any question about it? Jaffray had found out that Peter Blake was masquerading as Alec Dunn, and so Peter Blake had killed Jaffray to save himself from exposure and arrest for the murder of Tom Murchison—a crime for which he was being hunted by the law.

But Peter Blake had not killed Jaffray.

Another three paces—forward—back again—another three . . .

Marion! . . . Oh, God! . . .

Would she have ever cared; in time, would she have come to care—as he cared? An inner voice answered him: "Yes." It reiterated itself fiercely, challengingly, defiantly: *"Yes!"* It had been dawning in her eyes, her voice, her smile that night when she and he had been together up there on the deck—and he had lied to her, clinging desperately to a lie that he might not crush out forever, in horror and aversion, the glory of a great promise that in its fulfillment would hold all that was tenderest and dear in life. And so she would have cared, would she? Rather a bit of ego, of braggadocio, wasn't it? Oh, well, if he was so *sure!* Go on, then, and picture the future as it might have been—the years with her—the world a fairyland of love in which just they two lived—happiness—the glad things! Go on and draw the picture—and torment himself the more—go on—go on. . . .

She, the thought of her—that was what made him flinch, wasn't it? If Marion had never existed, if love for her had never come into his life, he could have faced the world, in a sense contemptuous of the world's verdict, and in the end have accepted the ignominy and the shame and the brutal unfairness of

it all with perhaps a certain fatalistic philosophy—but he could never be contemptuous or in any measure philosophical over the verdict that she would pronounce, that she must already *have* pronounced in her own mind. He did not blame her for it. Why should he? If love had come to her, reached its fullness, she might have stood defiant of the world, trusting in him, refusing to believe anything but the promptings of her own heart; but love had not come—only the dawning that he dared to imagine he had seen—and that had been shattered in its inception. What other verdict could she arrive at, save the one pronounced by everybody else?

And now any chance to reverse that verdict, to fight for the evidence of his innocence, to fight for his right to her, to fight for her love, was gone—he was a prisoner and fight was denied him. He was locked in here—a caged beast. No one had come near him except the steward who brought him food, and who was always escorted by two burly seamen. He was counted not only a beast, but a *dangerous* beast! Well, perhaps, he would be if—if he could only get out! There were limits to human endurance—mental endurance. Some one on board here was walking about free and unsuspected, because he, Peter, was safely caged. Captain Mumm hadn't come—they wouldn't let the little red-haired skipper come, of course. Nor Marion. Marion! Why should she come? What made him say that? Was he beginning to lose his reason?

Peter stood abruptly still and listened. There seemed to be a sudden and unusual commotion aboard the *Isis*—faintly, voices reached him; faintly, there came the patter of hurrying feet along the deck over his head. What was it?

He was aware for the first time that the short twilight had already faded into dusk and that it was almost dark, for something luminous now through the porthole caught his eye. He stepped quickly forward, and stood there staring out. A thread of light traced its way to the heavens, another and another, and broke high up into balls of fire. Rockets! Distress signals! There was a vessel out there. Yes, he could make her out now—about two miles ahead off the starboard bow, he judged—a sailing vessel, shadowy, just barely outlined against the last fading streaks of day on the horizon line.

He heard the bell in the engine-room jangle in response to the sharp, quick summons of the engine telegraph on the bridge; he felt the ship's vibration increase as the *Isis* began to work up to her maximum speed; he heard the shrill scream and hiss of an answering rocket, and the hoarse bellow of the siren above his head; and, watching, he noted the ship's course converging on the sailing vessel. This produced a slight change in the angle of his vision, but he could still keep the sailing vessel in sight by looking out obliquely from the after edge of the porthole.

But suddenly the night seemed to have settled down, strangely, densely, utterly obliterating the vessel from view. Peter rubbed his eyes, and then a sharp, startled exclamation burst from him. It wasn't the night—it was *smoke*. A great black cloud of it had enveloped the vessel, but now, swirling away in eddies with the wind, had brought a portion of her hull into view again—and a flame, lurid, red, angry, leaped skyward from her decks.

"Afire!" exclaimed Peter under his breath. "Thank God, for her people's sake, we happened to be near by!"

The *Isis* could do her eighteen knots or better, and the distance of two miles or so that Peter judged had separated the two vessels when he had first sighted the other was a matter of minutes only. The *Isis* was rapidly closing down on the burning craft. Peter watched tensely. The smoke rolled in dense, ever increasing volume from the other's decks, the tongue-flames leaped higher and higher. The vessel—a large brig, Peter now saw—seemed to be literally ablaze from stem to stern.

The brig began to lower boats—little black objects scarcely discernible in the semi-darkness, and entirely hidden at moments by the smoke. There seemed to be four of them. The *Isis* was to windward and only a few hundred yards off now. Again Peter heard the jangle of the engine-room bell. There was a sudden cessation of vibration, and the *Isis* began to lose her way. There came the tramping and running of feet, the creak of tackle and cordage—the *Isis* was lowering her gangway ladders. Peter could see the small boats sweeping on now toward the *Isis;* he could hear the swish and splash of oars, and hoarse distracted cries from the oarsmen—and, from the *Isis'* deck, cheery shouts flung back encouragingly.

And then he lost sight of the boats under the *Isis'* hull, and heard them bump against the ship's side. From fore and aft he heard the boats' occupants come climbing up the ladders—and then in Peter's ears there rang a din of chorused screams, and yells, and demoniacal shouts, and shrieks of mad derision; and a shot rang out, and another, and another; and, before his eyes, while he still stood in stunned amazement staring out through the porthole, the smoke and flames disappeared from the brig as though by magic, and dancing, yelling shapes lined her decks, and she

began to move rapidly toward the *Isis,* closing the gap between them.

Peter stood now with muscles tense, rigid, his face white and set. Shots, yells, the scurrying and trampling of feet from all parts of the deck above him still went on. It was growing very dark now; but, blacker than the night, he could see the marauding brig, by the aid of an auxiliary engine probably, warping alongside. The trick had been turned with a devil's cunning —a smoke screen and a bonfire or two on the deck, and a rocket that begged in the name of God succor for those in distress! And the *Isis* had fallen into the trap. In no other way could a sailing vessel have coped with her and caught her.

A jar rang along the *Isis'* side. Something bulked against the porthole, leaving the cabin in impenetrable darkness. Peter thrust out his hand through the porthole, and the tips of his fingers touched wood. The brig's hull, of course! His cabin was below the flush after-deck of the *Isis,* and the brig's bulwarks would just about be on a level with that. The brig was fast alongside. Loot now! And then—what?

The yells had increased, but they seemed to be yells now that were all in strange, screaming, unintelligible tongues, as apes and wild things might scream and cry out and express their lust and triumph—no English voice answered them. Another rush of feet, more of them this time, pattered suddenly again overhead, and went racing here and there in every direction—the rest of the men from the brig, obviously, who had come to vie with the boats' crews in a first-hand scramble for plunder.

And then a lull, strangely sinister, it seemed, in its contrasting silence, fell for an instant upon the din and turmoil—and out of the lull there came, of a sudden,

a woman's cry. It rang out in an agony of dread and horror, rang out a second time—and died away in a strangled, choking note.

For a fraction of a second, Peter stood motionless, like one carved in stone, with uplifted head, staring at the darkness above him, as though his eyes had pierced through the barriers of the cabin ceiling and the deck itself, and he was watching with horrified fascination some scene beyond—and then he turned and leaped across the cabin, and, like a madman in his frenzy, hurled himself against the door. There was only one *woman* aboard the *Isis*.

"Marion!" he cried; and again, and again: "Marion!"

And again, and again, he flung himself upon the door, striving with all his strength and weight to smash it with his shoulders, using himself as a human battering ram, beating at the panels until his fists were raw and bleeding, and until from sheer exhaustion, his breath coming in great gasps, he hung swaying upon his feet, grasping at the edge of his bunk for support.

As well have pitted himself against a stone wall!

There were no longer any shots from above—just a hubbub of shouts and cries and wild shrieks of laughter; but these reached him now in merely a subconscious way. Only one cry, a cry in a woman's voice, a cry that had been uttered very long ago, echoed and re-echoed in his ears—and he was still here, penned up, caged, impotent.

Strange that some of those devils running amuck had not heard him battering at the door—it must be because they were making so much noise themselves, and because the cabin was down below decks. Anyway, he must take the risk again, for there was another way of attacking it! He started to tear at the

planking that made the side of his bunk. If he could get one of these planks loose he could break down the door. Better that he should be heard and take his chance with whoever came, than remain here and bury his head in his arms, a beaten thing!

It was Marion's cry he had heard. Marion's!

The sweat stood out in great beads on Peter's forehead; his muscles cracked, as, with feet braced against the wall, he tugged at the bunk planking. It began to give with sharp, protesting creaks. He pulled upon it with all his might, and, with a low, exultant cry, freed one end. The rest was easy now. He tore the other end loose, paused for an instant to regain his breath—and then, with the plank poised for its drive against the door panels, he stood suddenly still.

"Peter!" It came in a low, vibrant whisper from outside the door. "I've got a bar here, Peter, my lad. Stand by to give me a hand. I'm going to force the door."

It was the little red-haired skipper's voice.

"Right!" said Peter hoarsely—and flung the plank down on the bunk.

It was perhaps half a minute, no more, and yet to Peter it seemed a space of time immeasurable, as he listened and waited, while the little red-haired skipper drove his bar in between the door jamb and the edge of the door, and prized at the lock. And then with a snap the lock gave way, and the door stood open.

It was dark. There was no light in the alleyway. Peter could barely make out the other's form. A revolver was thrust into his hand.

"Take it, my lad!" whispered the little skipper hurriedly. "I fancy the only thing left is a bit of a fight before they get us. I thought you'd rather go out

that way, son. Their trick worked, all right! There ain't been any blood spilled so far, because they had us cold before anybody realized what was up; and none of us was armed, of course; but they've got all the crew under hatch for'ard now. I suppose they'll scuttle the ship when they get through looting, on the basis of dead men telling no tales. They had the rest of us herded on the deck near the saloon entrance when they warped their hell's craft alongside, and——"

"Wait!" interrupted Peter tensely. "Marion—Miss Garth—I heard her——"

"I'm coming to that—that's how I got here," broke in the little skipper gruffly. "We were all standing together; Stone, and some of the officers, Rand, Garth and Miss Garth, you understand?—the swine were packed around us four or five thick—Malays, most of 'em, though there was a smattering of black islanders amongst 'em, too—then a tall fellow, dressed like a European, but with the face of a devil, broke through the circle and shouted out some kind of an order. And four or five of 'em grabbed Miss Garth, and carried her off to the brig alongside. Mr. Garth fought like a tiger, and so did the rest—except me. I didn't, Peter, because it wasn't any good, and there wasn't a hope. They were ten to one, and I was thinking of something else. I'd lost my own revolver, of course, when we got pitched into the water from the *Break O' Dawn;* but yesterday when I was in Mr. Garth's rooms talking to him, I saw a brace of 'em in the drawer of one of the stands that he'd opened in looking for some papers, and so, 'Damme,' says I to myself, 'mabbe here's a chance for Peter and me to get a few of these hellions before we all go out!' And then, in the mêlée, I slipped back

through the saloon entrance without being noticed, and ran to Mr. Garth's stateroom for the revolvers; then I dived down below, got a steel bar from the engine-room to use on this door, and——"

"You say," said Peter in a flat, monotonous voice, "that they've got Marion—Miss Garth—on board that brig out there? Nothing else matters, does it?"

The little skipper made a sudden choking sound.

"God! Yes, I know!" he said thickly. "I know what you mean, Peter. Yes, they've got her aboard there."

"Then," said Peter, "I'm going aboard there, too."

There was an instant's silence.

The little red-haired man's hand crept to Peter's shoulder.

"What good could you do, Peter, my lad, even if you managed to get aboard? Could you stand off a hundred of 'em?"

Peter thrust forward the revolver in his hand.

"If it came to the worst, I could give her this," he said. Then his voice broke queerly. "Damn it, don't you understand! She's a *white* woman!"

Again there was an instant's silence.

"Aye," said Captain Josephus Mumm in an unsteady voice, "you could give her that—there's a chance in a thousand that you could; or, if you had to, Peter, you—you could do it for her yourself at the last—she'd thank you for that, too. And so we'll make a try, my lad."

"No!" said Peter sharply. "Not you! There wouldn't be a chance then. Those devils know nothing about me; but they've seen you and know you're aboard, and the minute they miss you they'll start scouting for you—they've probably started now. And if they didn't find you on board here, they'd search

their own vessel—and that would be the end of it. Go back to the others—and give me my chance. I don't think they'll scuttle the *Isis,* but if that's their intention, then the end would be the same whether or not you and I fought them for a few minutes in some corner while our cartridges lasted. Go back to the others, and don't use that gun of yours, except as a last resort—for it would only mean reprisals on their part, if, after all, when they've got all they want in the shape of loot, they intend to let the *Isis* go."

"Peter," said the little skipper, and stumbled for his words, "it's like letting you go to your death alone, but it's logic, Peter, and you're right, and——"

"There's no other way," said Peter simply, "and there's no time to lose." He caught the other's hand, and wrung it hard—and the next instant, brushing by the little red-haired man, he was racing down the alleyway in the darkness.

"Peter!"

But Peter was merely subconsciously aware that back somewhere there behind him the little man out of a full heart had called his name. He ran on swiftly. There should be a companionway here somewhere, and a door above opening on the *Isis'* flush after-deck. Yes, here it was! He flung himself up the stairway, and reached the door, which he found to be open.

And now he halted to peer out cautiously along the deck. There did not seem to be any one in the immediate vicinity—shouts, jeering yells, a pandemonium of noise dinned at his ears, but it all came from the deck above, and from forward and amidships of the *Isis*—the cabins, the saloon and the lounge were obviously the prime attraction, since they held the promise of the richest rewards for the looters! For a second

more, Peter held there motionless—to get his bearings now, to note the spars and rigging of the brig looming up over the *Isis'* hull in spidery and grotesque tracery against the night—and then he darted across the deck and gained the rail.

He crouched there for a moment. No one, so far, had seen him. He raised himself up, and looked over the rail. As he had thought, the brig's deck and the flush after-deck of the *Isis* were almost level—nothing separated them but the bulwarks of the one and the rail of the other. The vessels were lying bow to stern, and a great black patch on the brig's deck, almost opposite him and near the foremast, caught his eye. This puzzled him for an instant; then he understood. It was an open hatch. He could distinguish a few men here and there on the brig's deck—but the nearest was a single figure with back turned and a good fifty or sixty feet away.

The chances were at least even that he would not be seen in the darkness—and the chances were not likely to be better! Without a sound, his movements as quiet and agile as a cat's, Peter worked his way over the rail and bulwarks, and landed on the brig's deck. And then for an instant he held his breath. From somewhere toward the brig's stern an order was bellowed out, and every man that he had previously noted on the deck, it seemed, began to move forward in his direction. He had not been seen—he was sure of that—but in another minute they would be around him. The open hatch, then! If he could reach that! To drop on the deck and crawl was to court observation; to move nonchalantly was his one chance of being accepted, for just the second or two that he needed, as one of themselves.

It was only a few feet, but Peter's lips were set

and hard as he covered the short distance; and then, gaining his objective, and with a swift glance around to assure himself in so far as he could that he was still unobserved, he lowered himself silently over the edge of the hatch. They were very close now—evidently coming here to the hatch itself for some purpose. He could hear them chattering one to another. He hung for an instant to the hatch combing—and then, his feet dangling in air, he let himself drop.

CHAPTER XVI

TAJAL ALI

THE lights had been turned on in Captain Stone's cabin beneath the bridge of the *Isis,* and a group of three men, consisting of Humphrey Garth, Rand, and the yacht's commander, their hands lashed behind their backs, stood herded there, the door closed upon them. Humphrey Garth's eyes were hard, his jaws were clamped together, but there was a white agony in his face, and his shoulders drooped like those of an old man grown weary and spent. Captain Stone's face, on the contrary, was red, almost apoplectic in his rage and fury. Herman Rand, the other one of the three, was the only one who spoke—he swore low, bitterly, constantly, his voice flat, without inflection, menacing.

From fore and aft along the decks of the *Isis* came continuously the sound of high-pitched voices, calling out shrilly one to another, the patter of quick moving feet, and the bump and clatter of objects being moved, as, very obviously, the process of looting went on.

Suddenly the door of the cabin was flung open, and a fourth man was propelled so violently through the doorway that he pitched to his face on the floor. It was the little red-haired skipper, his face battered and bleeding, his hands, like those of the others, lashed behind him.

The door closed again.

Captain Josephus Mumm lay there for a moment blinking in the light, his breath coming in short, hard gasps.

"Sorry we can't help you up," said Rand with a mirthless laugh; "but we're in the same case as yourself. You appear to have been a bit less fortunate than we were, however—for we seem to have escaped some of their delicate and pleasant little attentions! Where have you been?"

Captain Josephus Mumm sat up, and blinked around him again. He was not at all in a happy frame of mind. He had acted on Peter's advice—and he was not at all sure but that he regretted it now with all the turbulent, fighting soul of him. His impulse, when he had come on deck after leaving Peter and a rush had been made at him, had been to empty his revolver into his assailants, and take what toll he could before they finished him; but, instead, because of Peter's advice, he had, apart from a resort to his fists, allowed his combative impulse to carry him no further.

"What happened?" prompted Rand.

The little red-haired man got to his feet now, and for the third time blinked around the circle. None of these three men was a friend of Peter, and he would not have trusted one of them for a second with the knowledge of Peter's escape and present whereabouts —to say nothing of his, Captain Josephus Mumm's, own participation in the affair. Nor was there any valid reason why he should! It wouldn't relieve Humphrey Garth's feeling any, for instance, to know that Peter was on board the marauding brig with Marion—Peter, in Humphrey Garth's eyes, was a murderer of the most abandoned type, and even a degree lower, if that were possible, than the crew from the brig itself into whose hands his daughter had fallen.

"What happened!" echoed Captain Josephus Mumm savagely. "Well, I'll tell you! I got knocked

pretty near through the companionway entrance when that fight was going on over Miss Garth, and none of the swine seemed to have noticed me. I thought I saw a chance to slip below and get a revolver—and that's what I did." The little red-haired man paused, and moistened his bruised lips.

"And then?" Rand asked.

"Blast 'em—they took it away from me!" snarled Captain Josephus Mumm. "I didn't know they were watching. That's all!"

Humphrey Garth slumped suddenly down in a chair.

"What are we going to do?" he cried out in hollow, shaken tones. "My God, what are we going to do? Marion! We must do something!"

The little group with one accord glanced at the man—and each looked quickly away again.

No one answered him.

Presently the door opened once more.

Lahat Khan, as dapper and trim as ever in his steward's uniform, stood in the doorway. He was smiling softly, as he bowed profoundly to the occupants of the cabin.

Rand took an abrupt step forward.

"Ah—you!" he exclaimed gruffly. "I had an impression that everybody else on board, except ourselves here, had been made prisoners below decks somewhere—you, however, appear to be still functioning, and, from that damned smile on your face, quite at your ease. What's the meaning of it?"

"Mr. Rand," said Lahat Khan, "I——"

Humphrey Garth lunged up from his chair.

"First of all, come in here and untie these lashings on our wrists!" he ordered sharply.

Lahat Khan shook his head.

"Sir, I regret so much!" he said blandly. "In a

little while perhaps, if Mr. Garth and his friends are wise they will be set free. Those are the words of Tajal Ali, who is the chief of those who have come aboard the *Isis,* and who has come now to talk to you. See—he is here!" He stepped aside from the doorway, and a tall figure, swarthy of face, in white, well-fitting European dress, came forward into the cabin. "Gentlemen," announced Lahat Khan smoothly, as he closed the cabin door again and took his place beside the newcomer, "this is Tajal Ali."

Humphrey Garth, tugging suddenly and furiously at his bonds, made a menacing movement forward as he instantly recognized the man as the one who, a little while ago, out on deck there, had given orders to have Marion carried aboard the brig.

A revolver appeared in Tajal Ali's hand.

"Mr. Garth," he said sharply and in fluent English, "that sort of thing will do you no good whatever. Your hands are tied in more ways than one. I have only to raise my voice and my men who are waiting outside that door will come in; or, if necessary, I could, of course, shoot you myself where you stand."

Humphrey Garth stood still. Rage, grief, fury, a mad anxiety possessed him. His brain, chaotic as it was, warned him of the futility of any act that would precipitate violence; but the soul of him seemed to desire one thing alone—to come to physical grips with this sea-thief and cutthroat in whose power Marion now was.

"I'd give all that I'm worth," said Humphrey Garth, hoarsely, "to get my two hands around your throat."

Tajal Ali shrugged his shoulders, and replaced the revolver in his pocket.

"You will have an opportunity of giving a consider-

able portion of what you are worth, Mr. Garth," he said evenly, "without resorting to such extreme measures. In fact, to come directly to the point, that is what I want—two hundred thousand pounds in return for your daughter."

Humphrey Garth stared at the other's face. He was conscious of high cheek bones, of eyes that glittered brightly through narrow slits, of a sort of phlegmatic cruelty expressed in every feature, of bestiality in the curve of the lips and the distended nostrils—and it was as though something cold and deathlike had clutched suddenly at his heart, as Marion in all her fresh young beauty rose up in agonizing contrast before his eyes.

"My word—damme!" The exclamation came fiercely from the little red-haired skipper.

No one else spoke.

Humphrey Garth stared around him. Rand and Captain Stone, both with set faces and angry eyes, had seated themselves on the edge of the latter's settee. Captain Josephus Mumm, leaning against the wall, was scowling ferociously. Garth's eyes came back to fix on Tajal Ali's face. He was dimly aware that some faculty within him was striving to assert itself—not a *bargaining* faculty—if necessary he would give his all where Marion was concerned at any time. This man asked for money for Marion—he was not absolutely sure that he had caught correctly even the amount demanded—that wasn't it. Oh, yes, he knew now: It was the training of a lifetime asserting itself. The *business* details! What, exactly, did this man propose? Was there some trick behind it all—some ugly cunning? If Marion were brought back on board the *Isis,* the *Isis* must then be permitted to proceed without further molestation, otherwise——

"In gold," said Tajal Ali with a faint smile.

"Gold!" Rand's voice came from the settee in a savage, contemptuous laugh. "What do you think this is—a travelling mint?"

"I think it will be—to the extent of two hundred thousand pounds—when you return," said Tajal Ali coolly.

"What do you mean?" demanded Humphrey Garth. "Do you mean that I am to go back to Sydney, or somewhere else, gather together that sum in gold and bring it here to you?"

"To wherever you are instructed to bring it," amended Tajal Ali curtly. "I mean just that."

"But—but meanwhile—my daughter?" Garth burst out. "What about my daughter?"

"She will remain"—again Tajal Ali shrugged his shoulders—"in my very good care until you return."

Behind his back Humphrey Garth twisted at his lashed wrists, twisted at them until the cords cut into the flesh. A week—two weeks—a month—perhaps more! Marion in this beast's power! A sweat bead oozed out upon his forehead. He fought for control of himself, for control of his voice.

"Admitting for the moment that I agree to pay you the sum you ask for," he said steadily, "your conditions are wholly unnecessary. It is quite true there is no such amount, or any amount even faintly approximating it, aboard this vessel, but my name and word are good for it in any financial center, and——"

"It is because I am perfectly well aware of that," interrupted Tajal Ali with a short laugh, "that my little brig out there is alongside your yacht to-night; it is precisely because Mr. Humphrey Garth is 'good' for two hundred thousand pounds that your movements have been watched from the hour you sailed from

Sydney. Did you imagine it was merely chance that brought you to the 'rescue' of a ship in distress this evening?"

"Watched!" It was Captain Stone, the yacht's commander, who spoke now. He jumped to his feet, and took a step forward toward Tajal Ali, his head outthrust belligerently from between hunched shoulders. "I don't understand this! Do you mean to say you knew beforehand what this ship's position would be at any given hour this evening?"

Tajal Ali turned to Lahat Khan.

"Sing for them, Lahat Khan, my friend, with that sweet voice of yours," he smiled; "but sing this time in English so that they may understand."

And then Lahat Khan laughed—and began to sing. The words were grotesque, but under the spell of the man's wonderful tenor voice they rolled out musically, rising and falling softly and in perfect cadence through the cabin; and the words he sang were those that had been posted on the little green baize notice board at the head of the main companionway at noon that day —the yacht's latitude and longitude, her run in knots for the previous twenty-four hours, the course she was steering. And Lahat Khan laughed again.

"Shall I sing it now, O Tajal Ali, in the native tongue, like one of the songs of an *ayah* to a child, so that they may the better understand?"

"You have done well enough," said Tajal Ali with a malicious grin.

The four men stood for a moment as though spellbound, staring at Lahat Khan.

Rand broke the silence.

"Good God!" he said heavily.

"The singing steward!" gasped the little red-haired skipper.

"Aye!" said Captain Stone. "Aye!" His voice choked; and then with a sudden rush of fury: "You —you sneaking, rat-eyed little devil, you've been broadcasting my ship's position from the lounge, have you? That's what you've been up to in there with your damned duster and your smirking face! Well, I'll wipe the smirk off it forever if ever I get free of this and have the blessed luck to lay my hands on you again!"

"Captain Stone is very angry," murmured Lahat Khan; "but he will not do what he says, though I shall still be on this ship with him for many days."

"What do you mean by that?" snapped Captain Stone.

"That you will be under his orders," interposed Tajal Ali sharply; "or you and this ship together will be under——" He jerked his thumb expressively downward.

Humphrey Garth slumped again into the chair he had previously occupied.

"Let's get to the bottom of this," he said thickly. "You imply that Lahat Khan came aboard here for the express purpose of keeping you informed of the yacht's position each day, and that from the moment we left Sydney you were planning to trick us as you did to-night?"

"Exactly," said Tajal Ali, a half mocking, half menacing note in his voice. "And there was very little trouble about it. We heard that Mr. Garth, the millionaire, whose famous yacht possessed even a broadcasting set, was about to make a trip to the islands, accompanied by his daughter. We needed only to put somebody else in the place of a certain steward. It was not difficult. The steward—what was his name?—Roberts?—was offered a position he could

not refuse. And I think you will admit, Mr. Garth, that the references and credentials presented by Lahat Khan would insure any applicant the situation. Your broadcasting set took care of the rest."

"And now," said Humphrey Garth in a strained voice, "you want two hundred thousand pounds for my daughter."

"In gold," said Tajal Ali softly.

Humphrey Garth reared up his shoulders.

"Bring my daughter back on board here at once and I'll give you two hundred thousand pounds now," he said. "I'll give you my check for it, and, while, of course, I have not actually got that amount on deposit, I will wireless my bankers to meet the check—or I'll sign anything else you like in the way of security."

Tajal Ali smiled tolerantly.

"I prefer your daughter—as security," he said; "I am not interested in checks, or agreements, or bonds, or papers of any sort—not even bank-notes. Such things have been known to have been traced. We will deal in gold, Mr. Garth—and in nothing but gold. And you will not see your daughter again until the full amount has been delivered to me."

No one in the cabin spoke for a moment.

"Go on!" said Humphrey Garth at last, hoarsely.

"You will go to Sydney, or wherever you like," said Tajal Ali, "procure the gold, and return with it to the rendezvous that will be given you by Lahat Khan. Lahat Khan will be virtually in command of this vessel, but that fact will not be known to any one except you four who are in this room—and you four are selected for rather obvious reasons: Mr. Garth, because it is essentially his affair; Captain Stone because he must navigate the ship; and you two others, because you occupy quarters in the saloon where Lahat Khan must

have the freedom that, otherwise, as a former steward, would at once arouse your suspicions."

Rand, laughed out sharply from the settee.

"You're a bit of a fool, aren't you? Do you expect you can stop the mouths of all the crew? Do you imagine that at the first port we touch it isn't going to be known at once that we were boarded by a piratical hell's-brood, and that Miss Garth was carried off?"

"Even a fool, as is apparent, since *you* mention it," said Tajal Ali evenly, "must foresee that. It is obvious that it will be so—but why wait until then? If you wish to do so, you may wireless the news now, at the present moment. What would be the result? A gunboat, perhaps two, would be rushed to these waters—and they would search—and they would return as empty as they came. You miss the point. The point is that no one but you four must know that Lahat Khan is involved in this."

"I don't see it yet," said Rand sourly.

"Let him finish!" Humphrey Garth burst out nervously. "In God's name, let's get to the bottom of this, and have done with it!"

"It is well said!" A new note was suddenly in Tajal Ali's voice, an ugly one of menace—his suavity was gone—his eyes were hard, narrowed. He addressed himself curtly, sharply, to Humphrey Garth. "I will put what is left to be said in few words. You will go where you like to get the gold. When the gold is on board, you will sail again, directing your course through instructions from Lahat Khan, who, in turn, will receive his instructions each day by radio, and who will not know himself until the last moment what or where the final destination is. Lahat Khan will receive his instructions in code, and the course will be

frequently changed so that any government vessel that attempts to follow, if you are ill-advised enough to ask for such assistance from the authorities, will be unable to do so in any case. Any attempt to arm your vessel in port or increase her crew will be reported by Lahat Khan; and failure to receive constant communication from Lahat Khan, which would mean that he has been harmed or placed under restraint, will cost your daughter her life. That is quite plain, isn't it?—your daughter's life for the slightest interference with Lahat Khan!"

"And if I refuse?" Humphrey Garth's voice was scarcely audible.

"If you refuse?" Tajal Ali smiled thinly. "I had not considered that as a possibility. Well, if you refuse I should, of course, lose two hundred thousand pounds, and in that case the least said about it would be the better; so I fancy the general impression would be that the *Isis* was lost in that bad weather we have experienced lately—and as for your daughter, you would probably prefer to believe that she was dead."

"Scuttled!" The little red-haired skipper's voice came in a snarl. "You mean you'd scuttle us with the crew battened down under hatch!"

Tajal Ali shrugged his shoulders.

Humphrey Garth's chin was sunk on his breast again.

"How long will you give me to get the gold?" he demanded.

Again Tajal Ali shrugged his shoulders.

"As long as you require within reason," he answered shortly. "I will merely remind you that the longer you take, the more *unpleasant* it will probably be for your daughter. Well?"

Humphrey Garth looked up, his face white.

"I agree," he said hoarsely.

"It was rather obvious that you would—since you had no choice in the matter," said Tajal Ali with a grim smile. "Very well! I will send my men at once aboard the brig. When that is done Lahat Khan will come back here and release you; and you, in turn, can release your crew." He stepped toward the door—and paused. "I should regret leaving you under the slightest misapprehension," he added coldly, "so let me repeat that any attempt at trickery, any attempt to evade Lahat Khan's instructions, or any personal attack or restrictions put upon him will be paid for by your daughter—in full. I bid you good-night and a pleasant voyage, Mr. Garth—and gentlemen."

The door closed behind Tajal Ali and Lahat Khan.

"Oh, my God—Marion!" Humphrey Garth cried out in his misery.

The others stared at each other and at the crouched figure in the chair with bitter eyes.

From without came the sound of suddenly augmented commotion—scurrying feet, native voices raised shrilly in command; and then, as suddenly, an utter stillness along the *Isis'* decks.

"They've gone!" gritted the yacht's commander. He broke into a flood of violent sea profanity—and abruptly checked himself, biting at his lips. "Sorry, Mr. Garth," he said in a low, strained voice.

Lahat Khan came back into the cabin. He was smiling blandly as he drew a knife from his pocket, and, in turn, beginning with Humphrey Garth, cut the cords that bound the wrists of the four men.

Captain Josephus Mumm was the last to be released, and, on the instant, the little red-haired skipper lunged forward, and his fingers, curved like claws, shot out toward Lahat Khan's throat.

Lahat Khan did not move.

For an instant Captain Josephus Mumm hesitated —then his hands dropped to his sides.

Lahat Khan laughed softly.

"I see that you have learned your lesson well from the mouth of Tajal Ali," he said. "And now, if Captain Stone will come with me, we will set free the crew."

Captain Stone followed Lahat Khan to the door.

"You'd better lend a hand, Mumm," he suggested.

"Right!" said the little red-haired skipper gruffly.

The three men left the cabin.

Rand lighted a cigarette only to throw it savagely away, and, stepping over to Humphrey Garth, put his hand on the other's shoulder.

"There isn't anything one can say," he said huskily; "but I think you'll understand best how I feel, and how I feel for you, when I tell you that the night before last I asked Miss Garth—Marion—to be my wife."

Humphrey Garth stared with haggard eyes at Rand.

"I didn't know that," he said dully.

"No," said Rand. "She did not say anything to you, I suppose, for the same reason that I didn't, either. She—she did not say 'yes' to me, Mr. Garth. But I am not without hope that some day she may perhaps come to care for me as I do for her. And so I think you will understand how much what has happened means to me, too."

Humphrey Garth put out his hand silently.

"Thank you," said Rand.

"If they've harmed a hair of her head, or—or if I never get her back," said Humphrey Garth in a dead tone, as though almost to himself, "I will never rest

until I have that man in my power and have killed him with my own hands."

"Yes," said Rand. "I know! I've thought of that, too—that—that harm might come to her even if the money were paid and she were returned to you. I don't think there is the slightest doubt but that she will be returned to you alive—because it's the money they want; but I was thinking of that other thing, while that devil was talking in here, and I was thinking there was something else that we, or I, at least, could do, that might turn the tables on Tajal Ali and that hound of a Lahat Khan and the rest of their crew."

"What do you mean?" demanded Humphrey Garth eagerly. "God, man, if there is anything we can do—*anything!*"

"Well, it's this," said Rand slowly. "It's a long chance, of course—but it's still a chance. We're not far from my place now—not far enough to make the time it would take us to go on there instead of turning directly back for Sydney a factor one way or the other. I suggest that we go on, and that you land me there. It will seem reasonable enough to Lahat Khan that, for personal reasons, I want to be home—in any case, I can dig up reasons if they're needed that will appear strong enough and plausible enough so that they will not arouse any suspicion. Once there, there isn't a native anywhere in these parts whose services and friendship I could not command, and there is the possibility that I may be able to obtain a clue to the whereabouts of the lair and rendezvous of these fiends. One thing is certain, in a few days I could have a thousand natives at work for me all over the islands, and more with every day that went by as I got the news farther and farther afield—

even up into Borneo. What do you think about it?"

"I think it might prove very dangerous for you," said Humphrey Garth slowly. "If what you were doing got to the ears of this Tajal Ali, he would not hesitate long before paying you a visit and squaring the account with you."

Rand, with a grim smile, shook his head.

"He would hesitate a very long time before he ventured upon anything of that sort in this part of the world with me," he said. "I would have too many natives at my back. But, anyway, I was not considering that phase of it. It's the idea of doing *something,* the chance of striking back. I'm not hopeful—I'll admit that frankly—Tajal Ali and his lot may have their headquarters way up in the Archipelago a couple of thousand miles away, for all I know—but anything is worth trying."

"Yes," said Humphrey Garth, his voice shaken and almost inaudible now, "anything is worth trying."

"You agree, then?" said Rand quietly.

Humphrey Garth nodded his head.

"Then let's find Captain Stone and Lahat Khan," suggested Rand.

Humphrey Garth nodded his head again, and stepped out of the cabin—but just outside the doorway he halted suddenly, and for an instant stood very still; and then, with a low, quick cry, he walked straight across the deck to the rail, and, with his face crushed in his hands, stared out to where the brig, like some white wraith in the darkness, was rapidly vanishing from sight.

Rand followed, and touched the other on the arm.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Garth," he protested gently. "It's only making it a bit worse, isn't it? And it won't do any good." And then, in an under-

tone: "Here's Lahat Khan now coming along the deck, and he acts as though something were up, for he appears to be in an unusual hurry."

Humphrey Garth turned around. His lips seemed to have gone suddenly dry, as he faced the erstwhile steward who had halted abruptly before him. He touched his lips with the tip of his tongue. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides—finally he reached out behind him and locked his fingers fiercely on the rail.

Lahat Khan, in spite of the haste which he had exhibited a moment before, was now both impassive and imperturbable.

"Mr. Garth," he said unemotionally, "the man named Peter Blake has escaped."

Humphrey Garth made no reply. Peter Blake! What did Peter Blake matter under the present circumstances?

"What do you mean—escaped?" asked Rand sharply. "How could he have escaped?"

"How can I tell?" replied Lahat Khan. "A moment ago I passed the cabin where he had been locked up, and the door was open, and he was gone."

"Then," said Rand, "some of your own filthy crowd must have done it when they were aboard here—and in that case he's likely"—Rand jerked his head to seaward in the direction of the brig—"out there. He'd be in congenial company, anyway!"

Lahat Khan's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly.

"Even so, Mr. Rand," he said. "It may be so. I will send word to Tajal Ali at once—but we will also make a search here for the man."

Rand laughed shortly.

"Well, he ought to be found then—set a thief to catch a thief, you know!" He turned half away; and

then, as though it were an afterthought, he swung around again. "And by the way, Lahat Khan, when you're singing your damned song to Tajal Ali, which I imagine will still be your mode of communication, you can add another piece of information. Mr. Garth has consented to drop me at my home before going back to Sydney. I suppose I have to obtain permission. If there is any objection, I can give plenty of reasons—if you want them."

Lahat Khan shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should there be any objection? It is not you who will procure the gold in Sydney—it is Mr. Garth. If that much more time is taken it is his affair."

"Thanks so much!" said Rand grimly—and, leaving Lahat Khan standing there, he linked his arm in Humphrey Garth's and passed on along the deck.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PIRATE BRIG

PETER swept his hand across his forehead to flirt away the sweat beads that came dripping into his eyes. It was hot here in the brig's hold, stiflingly hot, and his exertions of the last half hour, which he had spent in scrambling and clawing his way over the jumbled mass of cargo, had not made the heat any more endurable.

He sat now on a bale of some soft material, physically at rest for a moment, though his mind was, if anything, more grimly and relentlessly at work than ever. He knew, of course, from the motion, that the brig had been under way for some time, but the hatch through which he had entered had been closed very shortly after he had dropped into the hold, and it was impenetrably dark here under deck. Save for the fact that the hold was only half filled with a heterogeneous assortment of boxes, barrels and bales, of whose contents he, of course, knew nothing, he had so far gained little by his arduous tour of inspection. The hatches were closed. He was trapped himself, wasn't he?

Well?

An inner voice laughed and mocked at him. Certainly he was on board here with Marion—but what good had he done Marion?

Peter's jaws clamped. He would have none of that! And, besides, he wasn't even trapped yet. He had only explored the forward part of the hold. And, trapped or not, he thanked God he was where he

was—because Marion was here too. What he might be able to accomplish, alone, against the brig's crew, he had not known, had not even stopped to consider, when he had come aboard; he did not know now; he would not have known even if he were now able to make his way at will on deck—he had depended wholly on being guided by the circumstances of the moment. But reach her he meant to, and reach her he would—somehow.

The forward end of the hold had been a disappointment to him. He had hoped there might be some opening into the forecastle, and he was not even now convinced that there was none; but the cargo had been stored there close up against the bulkheads, and though, with perhaps hours of effort, he might be able to shift enough of it to enable him to determine definitely what was beyond, to make that attempt now would, obviously, for the moment, be a waste of time, for there was still the after end of the hold to explore.

Peter's hand went to his temples, pressing fiercely against them. He cried out suddenly, sharply. Hours! He had no hours to waste! Marion! Where was she? Perhaps he was even now too late! He battled with the thought, trying to drive it from him; but it surged back again, bringing in its train a frenzy of fear and anxiety—and, too, a mad lust for vengeance. What had they *already* done to her? And the *Isis?* What had happened to the *Isis?* The brig had sailed away; had the *Isis,* after being looted and Marion taken, also sailed away—or what?

He began to crawl again, making his way aft now. It was difficult, almost perilous work in the intense darkness. He could not see his hand in front of him, and the bales, barrels, boxes and packages of all sizes and shapes, that were piled and packed together,

formed a surface so broken and uneven that it could only be negotiated by the sense of touch, and not always then with safety; now, his hand, feeling out before him, would shoot downward into nothingness, as into a miniature abyss; now, struggling out of some crevasse, as it were, his head and shoulders would bump against a box or case higher than its fellows, and which either must be climbed or a detour made around it. It was slow work, and, in the suffocating heat, exhausting.

For perhaps five minutes Peter scrambled and crawled and fell, and crawled on again—and then suddenly he paused. Sounds came to him from further aft, sounds like muffled voices—and then the sudden creaking of what was perhaps a door being opened, a door that yielded grudgingly, or perhaps the straining of tightly wedged planking as a possible partition in a bulkhead was being removed.

Peter raised himself on his elbow, peering in front of him over the top of a huge packing case. Yes! There was a light! There was a way out, then, through the after end of the hold! He knew a swift rush of relief, a surge of uplift—and then he caught his breath in equally quick dismay. There was not *a* light now; there were at least six or seven—and they were all bobbing up and down. Lanterns! For some reason or other, the hold was being invaded by a half dozen or more men.

His mind was working in quick, stabbing flashes now. They were after stores of some sort, probably. But if they found *him!* That would be the end, wouldn't it?—the end of any chance of reaching Marion?

The voices reached him now quite distinctly—one in command. The lanterns began to spread out, and

jerk up and down violently, as though their owners were beginning to climb up and advance over the cargo.

Peter instantly began to retreat. There was only one chance for him, and that was to hide; and the only place that flashed into his mind as offering him any chance on that score was where, a few yards back, he remembered crawling over a number of large bales that had been massed together. If he could worm his way in between, or under, some of those!

He was crawling, scurrying back in almost frantic haste now, heedless of the slight noise that he made—the groan of bulkheads and timbers, the ship's noises, must take care of that; and, besides, the voices, drawing ever nearer, were constantly shouting out to one another and helped to drown out any sound he made. Over his shoulder, he saw the glimmer of the lanterns, spread out from port to starboard, advancing in a line of dancing lights. He shut his teeth as the sweat poured from him. Thank God, a lantern did not penetrate very deeply into the shadows!

A minute more, and he had reached the bales. He worked desperately to prize two of them apart; and then, with one loosened, the rest was comparatively easy owing to the light weight of the bales and the soft, yielding nature of whatever the material was that they contained. He wriggled his way down between the two, and then in under one of them.

He lay still now. He was quite safe, he felt, unless, by the most improbable of ill luck, what the men with the lanterns were after happened to be under these particular bales, or were the bales themselves; but he seemed to have absolutely shut out from himself what little air there was in the hold, and he could breathe only with the greatest difficulty.

He could see nothing, nor could he hear the voices now save in a faint, almost inaudible way; and then presently he felt a sudden weight upon him. Some one was crawling over him. A moment more and the pressure was gone. Peter drew a breath of relief. They had passed on up toward the forward end of the hold. It should be safe now, until they came back, to push the bales a little farther apart so that he could get more air, and——

Peter's jaws snapped together. His hand, in the cramped space, fought its way swiftly to his pocket and closed upon his revolver. Something had touched the sole of his shoe, and was touching it again now—*nudging* it deliberately, it seemed.

And then Peter lay in amazement listening to a voice; a voice that whispered and came from just above his head, as though the speaker's lips were at the opening between the two bales.

"Is it in the sahib's mind that he is an ostrich? If the sahib who wears white shoes will draw in his foot and will make no sound, all will be well. In a little while, when the search is over, I will return. Is it understood, sahib?"

"It is understood," Peter answered in a numbed, mechanical way.

Peter drew in his foot. It must have been protruding slightly from the end of the bale. He had had no means of knowing that. The bales had certainly seemed to be long enough. Perhaps he had disturbed their position more than he had imagined when he had crawled underneath. His brain was chaotic. What did it mean? He had been caught—and befriended. Why? Who was this man, a native obviously, who at least pretended to offer help? Was it pretense—trickery—native cunning? Nonsense! The man

need only have shouted out his discovery and his companions would have swarmed around him. What was the game, then? But, equally, what was the good of propounding unanswerable questions? For the time being he, Peter, had apparently acquired an ally and was safe; but nevertheless—Peter smiled grimly now—he did not propose to depend the less on another ally, one wholly immune from the possibility of duplicity, which he already possessed in the revolver that was gripped in his hand.

A time that seemed interminable to Peter passed. He was no longer under the bale. A long while ago he had heard the voices of the men in the hold as they passed by him again on their way aft—and then, with the bales parted, he had listened intently, and, assured that the hold was deserted, had crawled out from his stifling hiding place. He was waiting now—for just what he did not know. But one thing he did know—there was a way out of the hold through the after end. He had been tempted for the last little while to make an effort on his own initiative in that direction without waiting for the return of the native who had spoken to him; but, though each minute was unendurable with the sense of inaction, where action that might produce results was perhaps possible, common sense, that promised at least an even chance of outside assistance, which above all things else was needed, had kept him there. And so he was still waiting. But his impatience, born out of anxiety and an agony of soul at the thought of Marion, would not much longer hold itself in check. If the man——

A voice close to him spoke out of the darkness:

"Sahib, I have made report that you are not here, and that, though they could not find the sahib on the other ship, he must still be there, since there are

so many more places there to hide than here."

The man was close beside Peter now, but Peter could scarcely see him, let alone distinguish a single one of the other's features. Peter frowned in a puzzled way.

"Do you mean," he demanded, "that it was for me you were searching around in here a little while ago? I don't understand! Where's the *Isis?* We've been under way for at least a good hour now. How did any one on board here know anything about me?"

"Sahib," answered the other, "Tajal Ali, whose man-servant I am, and who is chief of all on the ship, took many things from the other ship besides the Miss Sahib, and then he let the other ship go on its way. I do not know the answer to the sahib's other question, for it is locked away in the mind of Tajal Ali. This only I know, that it came to Tajal Ali's knowledge that the man for whom a great reward was offered, and whose name is Blake Sahib, was on the other ship and had escaped from the cabin in which he had been shut up."

"But why, then, if he thought I might be here," asked Peter, "did he wait until now to search the brig?"

"That also, sahib, I do not know," the other replied, "except that first search was made everywhere, and last of all down here in the hold."

"Well, that perhaps accounts for it, and perhaps doesn't," said Peter brusquely. "But it doesn't matter! What matters is the fact that this Tajal Ali of yours, or whatever you call him, carried off a young lady from the *Isis*. Do you know——"

"Wait, sahib," said the other softly, "it is my turn to ask a question. It is true, is it not, that the sahib's name is Blake Sahib?"

"Yes," said Peter tersely, "that's my name."

"And mine," said the other, "is Aghar Pind. Fate is strange, sahib. We travel always upon the Wheel, but who would have foretold that Blake Sahib and Aghar Pind would meet in the black hold of a ship that is full of thieves—and worse, sahib!"

Worse! The word cut at Peter like the lash of a whip. Yes—worse! That was it! Marion! He leaned forward, and his fingers closed fiercely on the other's arm.

"Look here," he burst out, "I——"

"Wait, sahib," said Aghar Pind calmly. "There is yet one more question. It is in my mind that it was because of the Miss Sahib, and for no other reason, that the sahib came here. Will the sahib say that I am right?"

Again Peter frowned. There was something about the man that he could not fathom.

"What makes you think so?" he countered curtly.

"Because, sahib," said Aghar Pind quietly, "if it were to escape from the law and find shelter with men such as these on this ship whom the law also seeks, the sahib would not have crawled in here to hide."

"A bit thin," said Peter gruffly. "I was a prisoner there with no chance. Here, there would always be the chance of getting away unobserved when the brig made land."

"Then, sahib," said Aghar Pind coolly, "I will tell the sahib more, so that he will understand that I know why he is here. I saw the sahib come aboard—and before that I heard talk between the sahib and a little man with red hair who opened the door of the sahib's cabin for him."

Peter stared blankly through the darkness.

"You saw me come aboard! You heard——" He

broke off helplessly. "Look here, I don't understand! You've kept your mouth shut, and so far you've stood by me. But what's the game? You are one of these men—even the personal servant of this Tajal Ali, or so I gathered from what you said—and yet, unless there's a trick somewhere, you are now double-crossing them for me, a man you never saw before, and you certainly could not do that without great risk to yourself!"

"All that the sahib says is true," said Aghar Pind gravely; "and it is because the sahib fears that there is some trick that I will not tell him why I am willing to help him, even as the sahib says at great risk to myself, until I have proved to the sahib that I do not speak with two tongues and that I am to be trusted. Listen, then, sahib! We will speak of the Miss Sahib, since that is most in the sahib's mind, and since it is because of that alone the sahib is here."

"Yes!" exclaimed Peter eagerly. "The rest can wait if you are able to tell me anything about her. Where is she? What have they done with her?"

"Sahib," said Aghar Pind, "there are two cabins which join together at the stern of the ship, which are the cabins of Tajal Ali. The Miss Sahib is in one of those."

"And Tajal Ali?" Peter's voice was suddenly hoarse, imperative.

"So far, sahib, she is safe," said Aghar Pind. "Tajal Ali eats now with his officers in the main cabin. Would it prove to the sahib that I, Aghar Pind, am to be trusted, if I took the sahib secretly to the Miss Sahib's cabin?"

Peter did not answer for a moment—the blood seemed to be pounding suddenly as though with hammer blows at his ears. He leaned forward again,

and again his hand closed with a crushing grip on the other's arm.

"If you can do that, and will," he said, his voice strained and tense, "there could be no greater proof."

"It is well," said Aghar Pind quietly. "We will go, then, sahib, and go quickly while Tajal Ali is still at meat. Keep close to me, sahib, and follow."

Aghar Pind moved away in the darkness, making for the after end of the hold. Peter could just make out the other's form as, in turn, he scrambled and crawled over the cargo behind the man. And then presently he found himself in an open space with what was presumably a bulkhead in front of him again.

"Sahib," whispered Aghar Pind, "this place is kept free for the petrol and oil for the engine. Be careful, sahib, and bend low. We go into the engine-room, and the opening is not high."

Peter heard again the creaking sound that he had heard when the hold was first invaded—obviously now from the opening of a door of some sort—and, guided by the touch of Aghar Pind's hand upon his arm, he took a few steps forward. Then Aghar Pind halted once more.

"Wait, sahib," whispered Aghar Pind again. "It is safer that the sahib should see now for a moment, for if he stumbled or fell into anything in here he might be heard."

There was the crackle of a match—and for an instant Peter blinked at even the tiny flame in the sudden transition from utter blackness. And then swiftly he grasped his surroundings. The brig was equipped with an auxiliary engine, of course. He found himself standing beside a large and powerful motor. The place itself, however, was small, confined, low-ceilinged—little more than a cubby-hole.

Opposite where he stood a narrow companionway led upward. He glanced quickly then at his companion, but Aghar Pind had his back turned and he could not see the other's face. As the match went out, Aghar Pind was pointing along the shaft of the motor to where it disappeared through a little opening at the after end of the engine-room.

"We go that way, sahib," said Aghar Pind. "There are little doors that open so that the oiling and other things that I do not understand may be done at such times as are necessary; but it is very small, and very narrow, and the sahib must walk with his back bent double. Does the sahib understand?"

"I understand," said Peter tersely. "Go on!"

It was even a little narrower, a little lower, than Aghar Pind had intimated. Peter found himself practically compelled to crawl upon his hands and knees. He was in what technically, on board a steamship he knew, was designated as the "tunnel." Above his head was obviously the flooring of the cabins; and, when, two or three yards along, Aghar Pind again stopped, he knew that he must be at the extreme stern end of the brig.

"Sahib," said Aghar Pind, "there is a trap door here that opens into one of the two cabins of which I told the sahib. Only Tajal Ali and I, Aghar Pind, his servant, of all on board, know of this, for Tajal Ali had it made secretly so that there would be a way out that no one should know. If the sahib is ready I will open it now."

Peter's revolver was in his hand.

"Just a minute, Aghar Pind," he said harshly. "If you are capable of betraying your master who trusted you, you are quite capable of betraying me! You understand me?"

"Sahib," replied Aghar Pind imperturbably, "what I do now, I do neither for the love of the sahib, nor for the love of the Miss Sahib. When I have proved my faith to the sahib, I will make all clear to him. Is it the sahib's will that we go on?"

"Carry on!" said Peter gruffly. "But"—he reached out suddenly and touched the other with the muzzle of his revolver—"you will go first, Aghar Pind!"

Aghar Pind laughed softly.

"The sahib forgets that I knew he had the revolver which was given to him by the red-haired man," he said—and, reaching upward, there suddenly appeared an opening above him, through which a faint light now came filtering down into the "tunnel."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MANTLE CLINGS

PETER, following Aghar Pind, pulled himself up through the opening, which, as Aghar Pind had said, was a small trap door, and found himself standing in a cabin that was luxuriously furnished in a barbaric sort of way. He glanced quickly around him. A divan piled high with multicolored cushions evidently was in lieu of bed or bunk; the walls and floor were covered with rich and heavy Oriental rugs of exquisite texture, and from the center of the ceiling there swung a magnificent bronze lamp of antique design. There were two doors: one that opened on the main cabin, it was apparent, for, from the other side, there came the sound of voices, laughter, the clatter of dishes; the other door, from its position just opposite where he stood, obviously led into an adjoining cabin.

Aghar Pind stepped silently across the cabin, and, taking a key from his pocket, noiselessly unlocked this second door.

"Sahib," he said, "the way is open. The Miss Sahib is in there. But come back swiftly if I call. Tajal Ali's custom is to spend much time at his meat, but to-night it may not be so. It is in the mind of Tajal Ali that I, Aghar Pind, have all this time been inside here to guard the Miss Sahib, and that I stay here until Tajal Ali returns. Does the sahib understand?"

For the first time Peter saw the other in the light, and for a moment he studied the man. Aghar Pind

was tall, muscular, very thin of face; and the face itself was unemotional—unreadable. His skin was light brown in color, but seemed, too, to possess a distinctly yellowish tinge, which, with the narrow eyes, suggested the probability that the man had a trace of Chinese blood in him. But there was nothing distinctive about Aghar Pind; he was merely one of a swarm from a mongrel breed that were to be found from the coast of China to the confines of the Malay Archipelago. A study of the man's face neither imbued faith, nor allayed distrust. Peter frowned. It was as much of a gamble as ever. And then Peter's frown deepened as his eyes swept over the other's clothing. Aghar Pind was dressed in what had once been flowing white garments—but these were now indescribably dirty and covered with spots of oil and grease. The crawl through the "tunnel"! Peter glanced at himself. He was in little better case. But if Aghar Pind had told the truth and had been under orders to remain in the cabin, the man's soiled clothing would——

Aghar Pind seemed to read his thoughts.

"Sahib," said Aghar Pind, impassively, "did not Tajal Ali himself send me at the head of six men to search the hold? Why, then, should not my clothes bear the marks of the search? Go, sahib—go quickly!"

The door stood wide—Aghar Pind had opened it without sound. Peter stepped across the threshold—and halted. The blood was suddenly surging through his veins like a mill-race. This cabin, too, was lighted and furnished like the other; and a figure stood there—a slim figure in white, a girl with shoulders that drooped as though under some unendurable weight, as, with back turned, she stood across the cabin from

him, her face to the porthole, staring out into the darkness.

Mechanically, Peter slipped the revolver he was still holding into his pocket; and then he closed the door quietly behind him.

Involuntarily, unconscious of the act, he stretched out his arms to her.

"Marion!" he said hoarsely.

A low, quick, startled cry answered him, as she swung swiftly around; and then Peter saw the blue eyes grow wide, a sudden whiteness come into her face—and saw her shrink back against the cabin wall.

"Marion!" he said again. "Thank God!"

She was still pressed back against the cabin wall—as though she would retreat yet farther if she could.

"You—you here!" she said in a dull monotone. "So you have come into your own!"

He had forgotten—forgotten for the moment everything except that he had reached her. He swung his hand now across his eyes, and drew back as though he had been struck a blow. She had not left him long in his forgetfulness. It brought him bitter hurt—an insufferable pain. He was Peter Blake, alias Alec Dunn—the murderer. That was what she had just said.

"Because"—he found his voice with an effort—"I am on board this ship with its thieving, cutthroat crew—amongst wretches of my own stamp?"

"And evidently of some consequence amongst them, since you are free to enter this cabin—where no one else, so far, has come," she added quickly. "I—I did not know whom to expect, but—but not you. If there is anything of decency left in you, anything of manhood, please go!"

She was standing very straight now, her head

back, her hands tightly closed at her sides. The light fell upon the golden beauty of her hair, the full, white throat, the half-parted lips, the glory of her—and the misery in her eyes. And Peter caught his breath—and a wild, mad yearning came—and a fierce, passionate refusal to endure the condemnation in her voice and words.

"No; I will not go!" His voice was low, uneven. "Not yet! It is not true, and——"

"Any more true, I suppose," she interrupted dully, "than that a few days ago you were also Alec Dunn."

He felt the color flush his face.

"I was Alec Dunn that night," he said fiercely, "for the same reason that, to-night, I am here."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"I do not understand what you mean," she said.

Peter took a step toward her. His heart was pounding, his voice almost out of control.

"Because of you!" he said. "Because I—I love you. Because you are all my world. Because you have never been out of my life since that night in London two years ago."

A moment more she stared at him—then she groped out with one hand behind her, as though seeking some means of escape, and shrank away along the cabin wall, and stumbled against the edge of the divan, which was the counterpart of the one in the other cabin, and, with a little cry, recovered herself. And then suddenly the blue eyes were flashing, and she drew herself erect.

"You are a coward!" she cried. "And a greater brute than these uncivilized beasts, vile as they are, who are aboard here! They, at least, have left me alone."

"While I," said Peter hoarsely, "have come to take

advantage of your helplessness to force my love upon you! That is what you mean. Well, you are wrong! What I have told you is the truth, and you shall hear it again. I said I was Alec Dunn because of you, because I thought that night you, too, remembered, and that perhaps in the days ahead you, too, might come to care—it meant every chance for happiness there was in life for me, and that chance would have been shattered, and utterly destroyed at the outset if I had said my name was Peter Blake."

"And, of course," she said monotonously, "it also prevented your immediate arrest—but it cost poor Jaffray his life."

Peter's face was bloodless.

"You shall not say that!" he said sternly. "I know no more of Jaffray's death than you do; I do not know any more than you do who killed your Daddy Tom, as I believe you called Murchison. I took the one chance I had to win you by remaining free and establishing my innocence if I could, and I——"

"You said all this the other day," she broke in wearily. "Is it necessary to repeat it? I already understand what you mean by saying that you came aboard here because of me. It is you, not these natives, that I have to fear. I understand that now."

"You do *not* understand!" he answered—and fought to keep his voice under control. "You imply that I was either in league with them, or at some time was either one of them or had had dealings with them—that, in any case, for whatever reason it might be, they obeyed my orders like a flock of sheep when they attacked the *Isis*. A bit far-fetched, isn't it?"

She drew her hands again and again across her eyes.

"How could you get here then, and have the free-

dom of this ship, as you obviously have," she asked numbly, "if you were not one of them?"

"There is only one man, the chief's servant, the man who brought me to this cabin and who is now waiting in there"—Peter jerked his head toward the door through which he had entered—"who knows I am aboard here. He found me in the hold, where I had to make a jump for it to escape being seen when I got away from the *Isis*. He brought me here by way of a trap door that opens in the flooring of that other cabin there—a sort of back-door exit, I take it, that the leader, whom he calls Tajal Ali, keeps up his sleeve in event of trouble. There is some *quid pro quo* attached to his services, I have no doubt, but I do not know what it is. Anyway, I am here."

"Because"—she was looking at him steadily now—"I think you said because *I* was here? Because, in some way, you knew I was here?"

"Yes!" he said tensely.

"And having got on board here"—her voice was coming coldly now, like trickling drops of ice water—"because I was here—what did you expect to do for me against a ship's crew?"

"It was enough that you were here in the hands of these devils," Peter answered passionately. "I didn't know what I could do. I came."

"Yes; I see you did," she said in the same cold tones as before; "but, even if your story were true—I mean that part of it in which you deny collusion with these men—I am still afraid your motive might not be so purely unselfish as you claim. Even to hide in the hold of this vessel with all its admitted discomforts might very naturally appeal to you as the lesser of two evils—when the other was a return to Sydney, and—and what you had to face there."

Peter took another step forward. His lips were white, ashen.

"You don't believe me!" he cried out. "You—you won't let yourself believe!"

She turned her head away.

"No; I am afraid I don't," she said evenly. "To be found in the hold of this ship by a man who would naturally at once hand you over to his companions, if, as you claim, there was nothing between you and those on board here, but who, instead, immediately becomes your friend, and by some secret method brings you at once to this cabin, is a little difficult to believe."

"Yes," said Peter bitterly, "the word of a man who murdered your godfather and then butchered your father's secretary is hard to believe—no matter what he says. But"—he was close to her now, his face stern and set, and his hands were reached out to grasp her—"I am not through yet, and——"

She fought him off madly, furiously. His hands fell upon her shoulders and he held her there. Her doubled fists beat at his face, and he made no effort to avoid the blows. A ring on her finger cut the flesh, and the blood trickled from his lips.

"You are a beast—a brute!" she cried. "I hate you—hate you—hate you! I loathe you!"

"And I love you, Marion," he answered, his voice breaking suddenly. "I have loved you since that night in London—but I do not expect your love in return, nor would I want it, God knows, nor would I ask for it until I could come to you with a clean name! But I have a right to say that what brought me here was love for you if I ask nothing back but a chance to plead my case and try to make you believe my story."

"Let me go!" she panted.

"No!" he said. "You are going to hear that story,

all of it—and you are going to believe me. I am going to *make* you believe me."

Again she struck at him—and again. And then, as though exhausted by her struggles, her hands dropped numbly before her.

He still held her firmly by the shoulders—and felt her shrink from his touch. Her face, hot with anger and humiliation, was turned away from him.

"Marion," he said huskily, "I do not know what the outcome of the position we are in is going to be, I do not know what to-morrow will bring for either of us, but now, for the moment at least, you and I are together, and it is going to be *my* moment, and you are going to listen."

She made no reply.

Quietly at first, painting in the details swiftly, Peter told her the story of the night on Murchison's island, told her of how he was later found by Captain Mumm amongst the natives on Malitua, and told her of the voyage of the *Break O' Dawn*.

She made no comment—still held her face averted.

"And that brings us practically to the attack upon the *Isis*," continued Peter, and now there was a passionate earnestness in his voice, "for you know as much as I do of what happened on board the yacht previous to that. Through the porthole of the cabin where they had locked me in, I saw the brig come alongside. I heard the fight. I heard your cry. I tried to get out of the cabin. I think I would have succeeded, but while I was making the attempt Captain Mumm prized the door open and let me out. He told me that you had been carried off to the brig. That is how I knew you were here—and that is why, as I told you before, I am here too."

She turned and looked at him now, the blue eyes

strangely dark in color—looked at him with a long appraising glance, and turned away her head again.

Unconsciously, fierce in his insistence, his grasp tightened on her shoulders.

"Have you no answer?" he pleaded. "Nothing to say to my story—no word?"

"You—you are hurting my shoulders—brutally." Her voice was almost inaudible.

Mechanically he released her. Some soft and delicate material covered her shoulders, and through this he found himself staring at two red, ugly blots on the white flesh where his fingers had been.

"Oh, God!" he cried out miserably.

She sank down on the divan beside her, and, bending forward, her elbows on her knees, buried her face in her hands.

For a moment there was silence; then Peter spoke again in a broken way.

"It is the story that I would have had to tell in court," he said. "They would not have believed it because the evidence was too strong against me, and so my only chance was to remain free, if I could, to find those who had made a scapegoat of me and—and some day prove my innocence. And there was you. I could not lose you without fighting for the hope of winning you with any means that were left to me. Was it the coward's way? The law would not have believed me, but I had hoped that perhaps you would—that your heart would have told you it was the truth—that I did not look, or act, or seem like a man who would wantonly, like a beast, commit murder, and——"

She had raised her head and was gazing fixedly past him to where Aghar Pind had suddenly appeared in the doorway.

Peter swung sharply around.

"Come quickly, sahib!" whispered Aghar Pind.

"Yes," said Peter—and looked again at Marion. She did not meet his eyes. "You do not believe me?" he asked desperately.

There was no answer.

Peter's face whitened.

"Well, then,"—his tones were dead, as, taking his revolver from his pocket, he stooped quickly and laid it in her lap—"believe what you like, but at least you will believe that I have not forgotten you are a *white* woman amongst men whose skins are of another color; and that, furthermore, whether you like it or not, I shall not be far away—but for me to be found here would cost this man his life, and in the last analysis I could give you no more protection for the moment than that weapon will afford you. Hide it in your dress, and—and"—his voice broke utterly now as he turned and leaped for the doorway—"I pray God you will have no need to use it!"

It seemed to Peter that a sound which mingled a sudden sob and a low, inarticulate cry followed him—but Aghar Pind had closed the door behind him now, and with almost frantic haste was both aiding and forcing him through the trap door.

"Make no sound, sahib, and hide again in the hold—but close to the door of the engine-room this time," breathed Aghar Pind. "All will be well here for a space—that I know. I will come to the sahib in a little while. Here are matches, that the sahib may have light."

Peter felt something thrust hurriedly into his hand, and then the trap door closed above his head, and he was in the darkness beneath the cabin floor.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BARGAIN

THEY struck no bells upon the brig; or, if they did, Peter had not heard them. As nearly as he could judge, it must be midnight —four hours, say, since the attack on the *Isis*. Four hours! They seemed to have spanned a lifetime!

He was waiting now in the hold just on the other side of the engine-room door where Aghar Pind had bidden him wait, for, though it was at least an hour since he had left Marion in the cabin, Aghar Pind had not yet come.

Peter sat with his face crushed in his hands. *Marion!* He whispered her name over and over. She had not believed him. Well, why should she? Who *would* believe him? That was why, for that brief while, he had been Alec Dunn—because he had not expected that any one—that Marion—would believe him. And yet somehow—to-night he had hoped. But in her eyes the whole thing must have seemed a grotesque, clumsy play on his part—his sudden appearance, apparently free, in the cabin—his apparently fantastic tale of how he got there!

He was conscious of a sense of drear personal hopelessness as though something cherished, a part of himself, had been torn from him and cast forever out of his life—conscious of it now because it was always there and always would be there, though now, at the moment, fear and anxiety on Marion's account were dominant.

What had happened in the cabin since he had left

her? Was she safe—still safe? He had sat here, fighting for control of himself—listening. No, not listening—imagining. Imagining that over the ship's noises he kept hearing—*a shot.*

His hands came away from his face, and twined fiercely around his knees. What good did it do him to tell himself that far down here in the hold he could have heard no such sound, or any other sound from the cabin in the stern? There *might* have been a shot—the one way out for her. All he had been able so far to do! She would take that way. He knew that. Marion would take that way as a last resort.

"Oh, God!" he cried out.

He became a little calmer. Aghar Pind's words brought a certain reassurance: "All will be well for a space—that I know." The man seemed to be trustworthy for some unknown reason—had given very decided proof of it up to now, anyhow. It had seemed almost desertion, a cowardly act even, to have left Marion in the cabin, but blunt common sense rescued him from self-arraignment or self-abasement on that score. He did not understand Aghar Pind, nor the man's motive; but Aghar Pind was obviously their one chance. To have remained and been found in the cabin would undoubtedly have cost Aghar Pind his life, and, he, Peter, would have been overpowered, and Marion would have been worse off even than before—and the end would have come then.

What *was* the man's motive? Why didn't he come? Why——

Peter rose suddenly to his feet. The door from the engine-room was being cautiously opened.

Aghar Pind's voice came in a whisper:

"Sahib, are you there?"

Peter moved forward quickly. He could just dis-

tinguish the other's form bulking gray-white in the blackness.

"Yes," he said—and caught tensely at Aghar Pind's arm. "Miss Garth—is she safe—is she all right? Has that cur Tajal Ali——"

"All is well, sahib, even as I told the sahib it would be for a little while," interrupted Aghar Pind softly. He closed the door cautiously, and, stooping down, placed at his feet a bundle that he had been carrying. "It is afterwards that the danger comes. Not very long from now, sahib, we make land, and the ship comes to the secret place where Tajal Ali for years has hidden himself and his plunder from the eyes of those who have searched for him. He is too busy now to think of the Miss Sahib—and he is content to wait. It is in his mind that he will land with the Miss Sahib and a few men, I, Aghar Pind, amongst them, sahib, and that he will send the ship away for a little while, for here it is near the spot where the *Isis* was attacked, and it might come about that the ship would be seen, and, after that, this hiding place, itself. Sahib, it is not until the landing is made and Tajal Ali is ashore that the danger comes to the Miss Sahib. Does the sahib understand?"

Peter's jaws were suddenly clamped.

"God—yes! Too well!" he answered hoarsely. "But I'll kill the man first!"

"Even that may come to pass," said Aghar Pind quietly; "for what is written is written. But before that—for the killing of Tajal Ali would not save the Miss Sahib from others who are chiefs even as Tajal Ali is, and one even who is chief above Tajal Ali—I have a plan. Will the sahib listen?"

"Yes!" Peter spoke through dry lips. "Yes! Go on!"

"Sahib," said Aghar Pind, "there is not much time, and I must speak quickly. Listen, then, sahib. The hiding place is a great cavern whose extent no man knows, that is beneath a mountain which in the days that are gone—I do not know the English word, sahib —spat fire and melted rock from its mouth——"

"An extinct volcano," supplied Peter quickly. "I understand. Go on!"

"Yes, sahib, that is the name," said Aghar Pind. "It is a tall mountain, and the mountain comes down to the sea in a straight line from a great height, and there is no shore. And when the sea is smooth the ship can go alongside, and at a certain point there is a ledge, a pathway, sahib, that winds upward between high rocks and leads into the cavern—but from the sea no opening can be seen; and even from close in beside the mountain one might search for years and find nothing. And also, sahib, without a boat or a ship, there is no escape for those within the cavern from this side, for the water is deep and for miles after the pathway ends there is no hold for the feet, and everywhere the mountain comes up straight from the sea."

"You mean, then, that there's another way of geting in and out?" said Peter swiftly.

"Yes, sahib," said Aghar Pind gravely; "but no man, except Tajal Ali and those who are chiefs with him, has ever seen it; but it is in the minds of all the crew that there is such a way. It is a strange tale, sahib, and how it was born I do not know, but thus it runs—that the way through the other side of the mountain is through a cave that is opened by a key."

Peter frowned.

"I can't say that sounds very convincing," he said; "especially as you are not sure there is another way out at all."

"Sahib," replied Aghar Pind, "I am sure—though I have never seen it. Listen, sahib! The cavern under the mountain is very big, but the space where men may walk about and live is but a little part of it all. Sahib, it is in shape like the moon when it is less than a quarter full. The part of the moon that can be seen is a smooth and even floor of rock; the part that cannot be seen is a gulf of blackness that reaches down into the bowels of the earth—and deep down in this is a roar of waters, as though, sahib, far underneath the sea poured into a bottomless abyss. And the distance from the rock floor to the water below is so great that no man has measured it, and to fall, sahib, would be certain death. Will the sahib remember what the moon is like in its first quarter? The lower point is the entrance to the cavern, and from there halfway to the other tip is where those of the crew live when they come ashore—but no man may pass that point except the chiefs and I, Aghar Pind, because I am the servant of Tajal Ali. At the other tip, sahib, is the entrance to a cave, and it is here in this cave that Tajal Ali has made a living place of great comfort for himself. How far this cave runs, sahib, I do not know, for I have never gone beyond a point set for me by Tajal Ali, for the penalty would be death; but I have seen Tajal Ali go and he has been gone for many hours, and so I am sure, sahib, that it is the cave men talk of which is the other way out beneath the mountain. And for the rest, sahib, it is in my mind, that whatever may be opened by a key, may also be opened by strong men without a key if the need is great."

"What you mean"—there was sudden, tense excitement in Peter's voice—"is that you will help Miss Garth to escape that way?"

"Even so, sahib," Aghar Pind answered; "and the sahib also."

"That's a different matter!" Peter shook his head. "How could I get ashore and into this cavern you are talking about with a shipful of men around?"

"I have given thought to that, sahib," replied Aghar Pind, "and it is in my mind that it can be done."

"Have you told Miss Garth about this?" demanded Peter abruptly.

"No, sahib," said Aghar Pind; "I have not spoken to the Miss Sahib. It was because Tajal Ali was coming that I made the sahib leave the cabin, and the sahib had not been gone a minute when Tajal Ali and the chief next to Tajal Ali, and also a third chief, came into the cabin—not the Miss Sahib's cabin, but the one through which the sahib made his escape—and they held council. And it was thus, sahib, that I heard it planned that Tajal Ali and the Miss Sahib would land and that the ship would sail away again for the reason I have already made known to the sahib. And all this time, because of Tajal Ali's orders, I stood at the door of the Miss Sahib's cabin, and neither I nor any man entered there. And then word came that the land was not far off, and Tajal Ali and his chiefs went then to the deck, for there are many reefs and much cunning with the ship is required; and then, sahib, I came quickly here to you. But first, sahib, Tajal Ali gave me orders to take the Miss Sahib to the cavern as soon as the landing was made, and to wait for him there."

"And you think you can get me ashore, too?"

"Yes, sahib."

"And then?"

"And then, sahib, I would prepare food and drink

for Tajal Ali as is the custom when we are in the cavern, and when he had drunk he would sleep long because of what was in the drink, and——"

"You mean you'd drug him?"

"Even so, sahib."

"And then?" Peter prompted quickly again.

"And then, sahib, we would have many hours in which to escape by the secret way of which I have already told the sahib. On the other side of the mountain the island is large, with many trees like a great forest; but only one man is known to live upon it, and he is one of Tajal Ali's men. And, sahib, he has a boat—and there are many other islands that are near at hand. I know no more than that, for Tajal Ali's ship comes only to the island in the night; but when the night has been bright I have seen this man sailing in his boat from the rocks that rise out of the sea beyond a certain point, and where a signal is always made in answer to the lights from Tajal Ali's ship so that if there be danger the ship may sail away again—and even so it has happened more than once, sahib, that the ship, instead of going to the cavern, put back to sea again until the next night. And so, sahib, it is in my mind that we steal the man's boat and get to another island, and after that to another, until it shall come to pass that somewhere we shall find white men and shall be safe."

Peter stared through the darkness for a moment in silence at Aghar Pind. He was half tempted to light a match suddenly, and, taking the other unawares and off his guard, get a glimpse of Aghar Pind's face. The man was plausible, and apparently sincere. He had already proved his worth as an ally—but why was he doing this?

"You are taking a big risk, Aghar Pind," said

Peter grimly. "This cave that is locked by a key! Suppose it is the wrong cave; or, even if it is the right one, that its exit cannot be forced without the key—what then?"

"Sahib," replied Aghar Pind phlegmatically, "have I not already said that what is written is written? I am sure it is the cave; but if it is as the sahib says, then, sahib, I will die at the hands of Tajal Ali."

"Yes!" said Peter crisply. "That is the point exactly! If you're caught they'd make an end of you the next minute. I have no doubts on that score. And that is what I do not understand. You have said already that it is not for love of Miss Garth or myself. Why, then, are you so ready to risk your life, Aghar Pind?"

"What the sahib says is true," answered Aghar Pind calmly; "and it is time now that the sahib should know what is in my mind, for otherwise all things between us are at an end here. Sahib, I am a poor man."

Peter drew back abruptly. His face hardened.

"I see!" he ejaculated. "You expect Miss Garth to pay you well for it?"

"No, sahib"—Aghar Pind's voice was flat, even, unemotional—"I do not know that the Miss Sahib could pay anything even if she would. I know only that she is a woman who was taken from a ship by Tajal Ali, who has taken many women for himself before, and that she is loved by the sahib."

"I see!" Peter ejaculated again. "But it's money you want, just the same?"

"I am a poor man, sahib."

"And so that puts it up to me?" said Peter harshly.

"Yes, sahib."

Peter was silent for an instant.

"How much do you want?" he demanded in a suddenly helpless way.

"Sahib," said Aghar Pind, "my price is five thousand pounds."

"Good God!" Peter laughed out raucously. "Five thousand pounds! Did you think I had five thousand pounds? I could not pay you even *one* pound! So far as I know, five or six shillings would account for every penny I have in the world!"

"What the sahib says may be true," replied Aghar Pind calmly; "but if the sahib wills he can pay five thousand pounds to save the Miss Sahib."

"All right!" said Peter, and laughed raucously again. "I'll pay it gladly, or any other sum you name, if you'll show me how!"

"Is not the sahib Blake Sahib for whom the law will pay five thousand pounds?" asked Aghar Pind.

For a moment Peter neither moved nor spoke. His hands had knotted suddenly at his sides.

"What do you mean?" he cried out at last hoarsely.

"Does not the sahib understand?" returned Aghar Pind evenly. "It is said of the sahib that he killed a man, and to him who delivers the sahib to the law payment will be made of five thousand pounds."

"Well"—Peter spoke through clenched teeth—"that's true enough so far as the money goes, but what has that to do with you?"

"Sahib," said Aghar Pind, "thus it might come about if it is in the sahib's heart that the Miss Sahib should be saved: If the escape is made, then the sahib would go with me to the officers of the law, and I, Aghar Pind, would say: 'See, I bring you Blake Sahib; pay me, therefore, according to the sum that is named!' And so, sahib, in that manner I shall receive five thousand pounds."

"Blood money!" The words came from Peter in a surge of contempt and fury.

"I am a poor man, sahib—have I not said so?" murmured Aghar Pind dispassionately. "If we make the attempt to escape and it comes about that we fail, then, sahib, I die, and the sahib likewise. Why, then, should I play with death without payment? I do not want to die. But if no attempt to escape is made then I am still the servant of Tajal Ali and all is well. But what will become of the sahib, and what will be done to the Miss Sahib that the sahib loves?"

Instinctively, as the fury within him deepened, Peter's hands shot out, and, grasping at the other's throat, tightened around it—and then, with a sudden cry of loathing, he pushed the man violently away from him.

Aghar Pind choked a little.

"Is that the sahib's answer?" he asked. "Is it the sahib's will that I go now?"

Peter swept his hands across his eyes. His mind seemed suddenly in turmoil, in chaos—his loathing of the man was something that now, in an instant, was relegated to the background, that was a minor thing, that mattered not at all. There was Marion—a way to save her. It meant almost certainly his own death, or, at the least, life imprisonment—he knew that. There was no chance for him against the evidence. But the cost was greater still than that. He would lose her—forever—for always. Vague, perhaps hopeless though those embryonic plans to establish his innocence had been, they would now be at an end—and, with their ending, the hope, the cry of his heart that he might ever win her love was ended too. But she would be saved. Cur though Aghar Pind might be, the very sordidness of the man's motives, coupled with the fact that Aghar Pind's own life would be at stake, too, was a guaranty that the man was

to be depended upon—to earn five thousand pounds!

"Sahib"—Aghar Pind's voice came coolly through the darkness—"the time is short. I have made known to the sahib what I will do and what I will not do, and there are no more words to be said. Is it the sahib's will that I go?"

"No—wait!" Peter's voice was harsh—shaken. "If I agree, the bargain would be that, once Miss Garth was safe, I would go in a sense as your prisoner to the authorities, and you would claim the reward?"

"Even so, sahib," said Aghar Pind laconically.

"But how do you know that *I* would keep my end of the bargain?" said Peter. "I am supposed to be a murderer. How do you know that, having got Miss Garth safely away, I would not turn on you then—to save my own life?"

"Sahib," Aghar Pind answered, "I have known many white men, and the word of some I would not take, but the sahib is not one of those. The sahib's word is good. If he says he will do this thing, he will do it, and I am content. Moreover, I do not think the sahib is a murderer, for I have heard the talk between him and the red-haired man, and I know the sahib did not come here to escape from those who held him on the other ship."

"So much the worse for you, then—and the filthier your bargain!" rasped Peter. "For the sake of money you'd hand over a man you believe to be innocent to——"

"Sahib"—for the first time Aghar Pind's voice sharpened—"that is the sahib's affair whether he be found innocent or guilty. Will the sahib make answer quickly?"

"Yes!" said Peter savagely. "Damn you, I'll go through with it!"

"It is well," said Aghar Pind. "And now——"

"Wait!" interrupted Peter curtly. "You will say nothing of this to Miss Garth. I am afraid she is not convinced of my innocence even to the extent that you are, or that, perhaps, she trusts me at all; but, even so, and no matter what the consequences to herself might be, I know she would never accept her freedom from any man at such a price, if she knew what that price was."

"All that shall be as the sahib says," said Aghar Pind. "And more than that, sahib—we three shall make our escape together, but the Miss Sahib shall not even know that it is Blake Sahib who is with her. I did not know that it was only the sahib who loved, and that the Miss Sahib was——"

"Hold your tongue!" cried Peter furiously. "Never mind what you thought! You keep to your own side of the road—understand? Now, go on—explain yourself. If Miss Garth doesn't know I'm along so much the better; for she will be less likely to fear"—a twisted smile came suddenly to Peter's lips—"that she is only jumping from the frying pan into the fire in attempting to escape. But if I go with you, as you propose, how are you going to prevent her from seeing me?"

"In the same way, sahib," Aghar Pind answered, "as the eyes of those on board this ship will be deceived when the sahib goes ashore. In the bundle which I have brought, sahib, there is food, but, also, there are other things. There are shoes of mine, sahib, for the sahib's shoes are not such as are worn by those who follow Tajal Ali; and, likewise, I have brought that with which the sahib must darken his face and neck and arms—and his ankles, too, for he must thrust bare feet into the shoes as is the custom

amongst those who are here. Also the sahib must throw away his coat; but the rest of his clothing is dirty, and his shirt and trousers that are much like those of many of the crew will pass in the darkness. But see to it, sahib, that the sahib uses freely that which is in the bottle and leaves nowhere the whiteness of his skin to be seen—it belongs to the one who is chief above even Tajal Ali, and who is not here, and who, it is in my mind, is a white man, though his face is as the color even of a dark-skinned Malay when he comes amongst us—and of this I am sure, sahib, for on voyages I have seen the chief in the cabin use that whereof I speak, so that the color may not wear off and the skin grow white. Does the sahib understand?"

"I understand," said Peter tersely. "And then?"

"And then, sahib, if it so happens, all will be well. It is Tajal Ali's orders that I go to the cavern with the Miss Sahib and prepare a place for her, for Tajal Ali will not come ashore at once. And so, sahib, I will make pretense that for the Miss Sahib's comfort there must be many rugs and cushions, and these I will make into two great bundles—that there may be need of a man to carry them for me. Does the sahib see? It is the sahib who will carry them; and so, with one on each shoulder, they will help to hide the sahib's face. Is all this clear in the sahib's mind?"

"Yes," said Peter brusquely.

"In a little while, then, sahib," continued Aghar Pind, "the ship will come to land, and when the sahib feels that the ship is at rest, he must open this door into the engine-room and listen. And when I call, let him come with all haste up the little ladder to the alleyway above which leads from the cabins. I, Aghar Pind, and the Miss Sahib will be there—and likewise

the two bundles. And I will give the sahib the name of Rahim Dé that none may know to whom I speak, even if I be heard; and I will give orders to the sahib in the native tongue to take up the two bundles upon his shoulders, and this he will do. And then the sahib will follow boldly and close behind the Miss Sahib and behind me, Aghar Pind, and speak to no man even if he be spoken to, and thus, if it is so written, we shall pass out of the ship. Is the sahib content? And does the sahib see that his risk is no greater than mine?"

"We'll leave the question of risk out of it!" Peter answered shortly. "The plan's a good one. I am content."

"It is well," said Aghar Pind softly. "I will go, then, sahib, for the time grows short. Here are the things of which I spoke. Let the sahib eat and make ready."

"I will be ready," said Peter gruffly—and the door closed behind Aghar Pind.

CHAPTER XX

THE CAVERN

THE brig was on an even keel, and, it seemed to Peter, almost motionless. For the last few minutes, the sound of many feet pattering up and down the deck above his head, voices frequently raised in command, and the creak of booms and spars as though some maneuver were being executed, had reached him faintly. And now, suddenly, he felt the brig bump gently once or twice as though her hull was scraping against something—the landing that Aghar Pind had described, of course!

Peter, crouched now at the opening into the diminutive engine-room, listened tensely. It had been, he judged, half an hour since Aghar Pind had left him, and in that time he had not been idle. A grim smile curved his lips. He must look a strange, queer sight! There had been a liberal quantity of liquid in the bottle that Aghar Pind had brought him, and he had used it liberally on every exposed portion of his skin. He had not been able to see the entire effect, of course; but the light of a match had shown him that his hands and arms and ankles, for instance, were a dark brown—much deeper in color, as a matter of fact, than Aghar Pind's. The point was, though, had he, with no mirror to guide him, and working, save for a match, in utter darkness, left some tell-tale spot exposed—the tip of an ear, say? Well, the test would come quickly enough now! That was Aghar Pind's voice, wasn't it?—harsh, voluble, as though pouring out in the native tongue objurgations upon the

head of some one who had incurred his displeasure.

". . . O, Rahim Dé!"

And then Peter understood—and in a flash he was across the little engine-room and up the companionway. He found himself in a lighted alleyway almost at the entrance to the deck. His glance travelled swiftly around him, and, with a sudden catch of his breath, his pulse quickened, he saw Marion, her slim figure very straight and erect, but very white of face, standing a few paces away; on the floor were two huge bundles of rugs and cushions; and, facing him, stood Aghar Pind, who, though the alleyway was lighted, held a lantern in his hand.

For perhaps half a minute, Peter was aware that he was undergoing a sharp and critical inspection; and then, with what Peter took to be a grunt of approval, Aghar Pind spoke shortly in the native tongue, and pointed to the two bundles.

Peter hoisted one to each shoulder—and found that, as Aghar Pind had promised, they almost completely hid his face and head.

And then Aghar Pind, under pretense of helping to adjust the bundles, thrust his head between them and placed his lips close to Peter's ear.

"There has been no chance to speak alone with the Miss Sahib," he whispered quickly. "She does not know it is in our minds that she shall escape." He drew back and raised his voice. "The Miss Sahib will follow me," he instructed shortly. "Come!"

Marion made no answer, but stepped forward after Aghar Pind.

Peter, his face hard and set, his lips tight, followed behind. They came out on deck. There were many lanterns, many men scurrying hither and thither —and some of the hatch covers had been removed,

and some of the cargo was coming up. But also, it was bright moonlight, and above the vessel on her port side, rising sheer upward to a great height, Peter could see a wall of rock, while above this again, until like some vast curtain it blotted out the sky and stars, a mountain reared itself precipitously up into the night.

The little procession threaded its way along the deck, and Peter saw that they were making for a sort of gangway that had been rigged from the brig's side to a ledge in the rock wall.

They reached the gangway—and halted. A tall, swarthy man, a Malay or an East Indian, Peter could not tell which, stood there. Aghar Pind made a profound obeisance.

Peter's eyes narrowed. Tajal Ali, of course!

And then the blood surged to Peter's head, and he was fighting madly with himself to beat into subjection the fury that had seized upon him. Tajal Ali was leaning forward, and, with his hand raising Marion's chin, was smiling scurrilously into her face. And in the lantern light Peter could see—could see her little figure drawn up to its full height, her eyes fixed straight ahead of her, her face a deathly white, and no movement of even a muscle, save that her nostrils were strangely wide.

"I will not be long," said Tajal Ali softly. "In a little while I will come to you." And then, with a few words in an undertone to Aghar Pind, he stepped aside.

The sweat was in beads on Peter's forehead. Suppose he *had* killed Tajal Ali with his bare hands!

Marion stumbled a little now, walked a little unsteadily as they made their way across the gangway, and gained the ledge of rock.

"The Miss Sahib must go carefully here," warned

Aghar Pind, "for it is narrow and very steep to climb even until we come to the mouth of the cavern."

And Peter, listening, heard no answer.

The ledge was perhaps six feet in width, and now it began to twist and turn, and, as Aghar Pind had said, the ascent became almost immediately exceedingly steep and difficult. They toiled upward, Aghar Pind's lantern lighting the way. Behind and below Peter caught an occasional glimpse of other lanterns, and shadowy figures that seemed to carry burdens on their backs, or—like himself!—on their shoulders.

It seemed to Peter that they travelled a great distance—on and on up the bare, rocky face of the mountain. His eyes scarcely ever left the little figure just a foot or so ahead of him. She made no sound; but, in the dim light of the lantern, it seemed to him that there was a strange listlessness in her movements, even when she tripped and stumbled on the steep, uneven pathway, as she frequently did. He wanted to call out to her, hurl the accursed bundles on his shoulders down the mountain side, and place his arms around her, comfort her, help her up the path, carry her even. But to disclose his identity would only frighten, terrify, and distress her the more. Better for them both that she should not know. The end had come between them now, because he had made a compact with Aghar Pind. Better for them both, even if they succeeded in making their final escape, that he should remain merely a native bundle-carrier whose name was Rahim Dé—better, far better for her, that he should have passed out of her life with that meeting in the cabin of Tajal Ali's brig. She would wonder, of course, for the papers would be full of the trial of Peter Blake—but she would never understand.

Was it half a mile, or a mile, that they had climbed? It seemed like ten. And now suddenly the moonlight vanished, and Aghar Pind's lantern seemed, by contrast, to burn the brighter. They had passed in through what—as well as Peter could make out—was a small natural archway that opened, as it were, into the mountain itself. He could see nothing beyond the very limited radius of the lantern-light, but he was conscious of a sense of vast, illimitable space—and from somewhere far down below him there came now a constant roar of waters.

Aghar Pind's voice, raised now and addressing Marion, reached Peter:

"Let the Miss Sahib keep well to the left, for on the right the fall into the waters is even as the height we have climbed, and for one who falls there is no return. In a little while there will be electric light, for a man has been sent ahead of us that the machine may be made to work. Does the Miss Sahib understand?"

Again there was no answer.

The footing was level and smooth now. Aghar Pind's lantern bobbed on ahead, and by its light Peter could see that, on his left, they were edging past a great mass of piled boxes and barrels and crates—loot, the accumulation of God knew how many raids, he made no doubt; but to the right he could see nothing, for the lantern rays merely broke against a wall of blackness. He looked behind him again. Other lanterns, those that he had seen coming up the mountain side, of course, were appearing now through the archway.

For perhaps a hundred yards farther, Peter estimated, they went on, trending a little more to the left now, for the piled stacks of what he took to be stolen merchandise of all sorts were behind them;

and then, suddenly, a string of incandescent lights overhead illuminated the surroundings—but only in a somewhat misty fashion, though Peter blinked a little in the sudden light. The lamps were strung too far apart, and seemed, in a way, only to enhance that sense of vastness which he had already experienced in the darkness; but he could see by looking behind again that the place was obviously an immense storehouse of what he was sure was loot—the piles of merchandise he had just passed were enormous—and they were being added to now by the burdens those who had come up the mountain side behind him had carried on their backs. Curious! They must be making some noise as they worked back there—but he could not hear any. And then he understood. That roar, constant, never ending, of waters far down below him! He looked sharply around him. To the right, perhaps ten yards away, the smooth rock platform on which he stood ended abruptly, as though, indeed, it had been cleanly sliced off with a knife; and out a little over the edge, where the light rays failed to penetrate farther, was just a black nothingness. For the rest, in shape, the grotto, or cavern, was, so far as the lights disclosed it, not far wide of Aghar Pind's description. The smooth rock platform was not unlike the shape of the moon in its first quarter—broad in the center, converging in a circular arc to points at either end, while always, out there on the right, marking the edge of that black abyss where nothing could be seen, but which he knew must be the bowels of the crater, and out of which there issued constantly that sullen, angry roar of waters, was the superimposing darkness.

But the habitable part, this curious platform of several hundred yards in length, the part of the grotto

that Tajal Ali and his men had put to their own unholy use, was, if not brilliantly, at least well enough lighted everywhere so that one could see near-by objects distinctly—and Peter saw that they had now reached its broadest section. Here, it was, he judged, some two hundred feet in width; and, here, as everywhere along its length, a roof of rock, fantastic in shape, hung with myriad stalactites that glistened like clusters of jewels wherever the light played upon them, sloped down to "wall in" the left-hand side of the platform. But the wall was curiously broken at the level of the platform by what seemed to be a succession of miniature grottoes that gave one the impression of doorways, each of which, as from a hall, opened upon a room. Perhaps that was exactly what they were used for—rooms—the living quarters of the crew, for instance! In any case, they were obviously put to some use, since the interior of one, at least, was lighted.

Aghar Pind spoke abruptly.

"The machine that gives light is in there," he said, pointing to the lighted opening Peter had noticed. "But beyond this point no man may pass except by the orders of Tajal Ali. Is the Miss Sahib weary? It is but a little way now."

Again Marion made no reply.

Peter smiled a little grimly. The words had been addressed to Marion, but he was quite well aware that the information was for his, Peter's, benefit. Translated, it meant that the first hurdle had been safely taken, that there was no danger now of being discovered by any of the crew, and that from now on there would be Tajal Ali alone to reckon with.

Peter's hands enmeshed themselves fiercely in the soft bundles that he carried on his shoulders. It would perhaps go very ill with Tajal Ali!

The platform was narrowing now very rapidly—and now, just ahead, it seemed to converge with the edge of the pit, and end abruptly.

And then suddenly they halted.

"Wait!" said Aghar Pind. "Here is the abode of Tajal Ali. I will turn on the lights."

The man vanished through an opening in the rock wall—an opening which, Peter could see, was similar to the many he had passed on the way along, and which he had identified as being entrances to the smaller grottoes that apparently honeycombed the main cavern. He looked quickly at Marion. She was leaning back against the rock wall, and, it seemed to Peter, was *grasping* at it with strange intensity. Her face was half turned toward him, and he could see that she was staring in a sort of horrified fascination at the edge of the rocky platform which here was scarcely a yard away from where she stood, and beyond which was only blackness, and, out of which from far, far down below, came always that sinister, hungry roar of waters. And there was fear, too, in her face, and it was wan and full of misery.

And impulse came again, and yearning came again, to cry out to her, reach out his arms to her, and he bit at his lips to keep back the words that fought madly for utterance—and turned away that he might not see her standing there like that and so torture himself beyond endurance.

Mechanically now, he stared back along the way he had come. It must have been a long way—many hundreds of yards—for the string of lights dwindled away in the distance, until the farthest of them, if, indeed, he could see those farthest away at all, were no more than pin-points of light. And there were men working back there, too, he knew—but he could

neither see nor hear them. Hear them! They might have been shouting, screaming, yelling—that never ceasing roar would have made mockery of all such sounds.

He turned sharply around as he heard Aghar Pind's voice. A soft glow of light showed now in the opening through which Aghar Pind had disappeared but a moment ago, and now the man was standing there beckoning them to enter.

Peter's eyes fixed on Marion again. She seemed to hesitate for an instant, then her hand went swiftly to the bodice of her dress, and as swiftly fell to her side once more, hiding itself in the folds of her skirt —but not before he had caught a glimpse of something metallic in her hand as the light struck upon it.

A queer smile twisted Peter's lips. It was the revolver he had given her, of course. Something of *his* that gave her courage and a measure of reassurance! But Aghar Pind, too, had seen the weapon, for now, as they all passed in through the entrance to what Aghar Pind had said were Tajal Ali's quarters, the man spoke again.

"The Miss Sahib need have no fear as yet, for Tajal Ali will not be here for a little while," he said softly. "And before he comes I will have talk with the Miss Sahib, for I have much to say to her. But first I must show this man Rahim Dé here where to put the things he carries, and give him certain work to do. Let the Miss Sahib sit down and rest herself, for she may have need of much strength before the night is done. I will return at once." He flung out a curt command in the native tongue, and motioned Peter to follow him.

And Peter followed.

He was conscious of a sense of almost staggering

amazement, of stark unreality, as though, indeed, at the rubbing of a lamp, a genie had transported him into the realms of the Arabian Nights. Suddenly there was a great quiet—the rock walls seemed to have blanketed all sounds from without, for now that roar of waters was no more than a low murmur. Underfoot were priceless Eastern carpetings; luxurious divans were here in profusion; the arched roof, some ten feet high, was crusted with innumerable small lights, some of which peeped out of the hearts of marvellously beautiful stalactites, which, in turn, seemed to absorb the light and glow with exquisite colorings.

Aghar Pind, still carrying his lantern, though it was extinguished now, drew aside a heavy velvet portière. They passed through, the curtain fell behind them, and Peter found himself in another apartment very similar to the first—and beyond this again were obviously many others, for he could see now that the cave, forming natural archways at varying distances, was, in effect, like a suite of connecting chambers.

Aghar Pind led the way through several of these, each one of which was, in its barbaric way, as luxurious as its fellows; and, finally, setting down his lantern, motioned Peter to discard his bundles.

"Sahib," he said, "the cave goes far beyond this into the darkness; how far I do not know—but this is the cave that men say is opened with a key. Tajal Ali is not like to come thus far, and therefore the sahib will be safe here; but he must make no sound, for no man of the crew may stay in this place, and so I will make report to Tajal Ali that I have sent the man Rahim Dé back to the ship. And then, as I have told the sahib, I will put that into Tajal Ali's drink which will cause sleep, and when that has come to pass we will try to find our way out."

Peter frowned heavily.

"I can't say I've ever been taken with that drug idea of yours," he said curtly. "It requires time for the stuff to take effect—and that's wasted time; and, what counts more, it gives him a chance to be with Miss Garth. You say that he will be alone when he comes here. There are two of us. It will be a lot quicker to tie him up somewhere out of harm's way."

"Sahib," said Aghar Pind, "I have thought of that; but also there is another thing that is in my mind. It may come to pass, sahib, that at the first attempt we cannot find our way out, and that we must try even for a second or a third time. It is the better way, sahib, that there shall be no suspicion in the mind of Tajal Ali—and there will be no suspicion in his mind because he shall have fallen asleep. But as for the Miss Sahib, that is another matter, and Tajal Ali's blood shall then be upon his own head; for if Tajal Ali lays hands upon the Miss Sahib, then we will do unto Tajal Ali even as the sahib says, and——"

"There won't be any doubt about that, even if I have to handle him alone," Peter interrupted in an ominously quiet voice. "All right! I'm satisfied! But the question now is what are you going to tell Miss Garth? How are you going to make her believe she is any better off with you than with Tajal Ali, and so get her to agree to go with you? And, besides, she'll ask you a lot of questions that won't be easily answered. My visit to the cabin, for instance, and how you came to take me there—and she'll want to know where I am, and what I'm up to —and a lot more."

"Sahib," said Aghar Pind calmly. "I will tell lies to the Miss Sahib. I will say that I, Aghar Pind, and you, Rahim Dé, have grown weary of our life

on the ship and are sick with a great fear that, because of the blood that Tajal Ali has shed and because of the robberies that are without number, it will bring us to our deaths if the white men's gunboat ever comes upon us; and, for that reason, we have plotted between us to make our escape, and that she shall come with us. And for proof, sahib, she shall see me prepare the drink that is for Tajal Ali. But if she still will not believe when the time comes, then the sahib and I, Aghar Pind, will take her with us by force so that she may escape. And as for the sahib, I will say that I was a friend to the sahib when I found him on the ship because it was in my mind that he would join me, Aghar Pind, and you, Rahim Dé, to make our escape, but when I went to find the sahib again he was gone, and that I do not know what has befallen him. Does the sahib know a better tale for the Miss Sahib's ears?"

"No," said Peter tersely. "The devil, himself, would be hard put to it to match your cunning!"

"I will return to her then, sahib," said Aghar Pind. "But first I will put out the lights back here. If all goes well, I will come to the sahib when Tajal Ali sleeps; but if it goes ill between the Miss Sahib and Tajal Ali, then let the sahib not delay when I cry out for Rahim Dé!"

"Right!" said Peter grimly.

CHAPTER XXI

MAN AND MAID

AGHAR PIND'S footsteps made no sound on the rich rugs as the man hurried away; but, though the lights in that portion of the cave where Peter was standing were now extinguished, Peter could still see the other—there were lights in the roomlike divisions of the cave nearer the entrance, and to Peter, watching, it seemed as though he were looking down a long vaulted crypt irregularly spaced with archways, at the end of which hung the heavy velvet curtain that he had passed on the way in. And now, looking more closely, he saw too that all of the other archways were fitted with portières, but that these had been drawn aside. He saw Aghar Pind pass through the last archway, and the portière drop behind him.

How long would it be before Tajal Ali came? How long would it be before Aghar Pind had administered the drug, and they could make their way out of this hell's-nest? There was no good in standing up—it would probably be a long time. Peter moved one of the bundles of rugs and cushions he had carried from the brig to a position where he could command a view of the curtain at the far end of the vaulted passage, and sat down.

Was there a way out? And if not—then what? He shook his head grimly. For himself, it did not matter; this was the end of his quest, the end to any hope of finding those who had made of him an outcast and stamped him with the brand of murderer. Quite

the end! Whether it came here—or in a jail yard with a black cap drawn over his head. But it mattered to Marion. Pray God, there *was* a way out!

Thoughts came, a surge of them—and he tried to trample upon them and drive them back. He did not want to think. But they were stronger than he was; and, while the minutes passed, they would not be denied—and that night in London came, and Murchison came, and Murchison's pearls, and Hafu, and Captain Josephus Mumm, and Yar Lal, and——

A cry, sharp, quick—a cry as of sudden terror—a cry that was unmistakably Marion's—rang through the cave.

In a flash Peter was on his feet and speeding toward the curtain. He made no sound as he ran, and he strained his ears to catch another cry—but none came. What was it? What had happened? It could not have been more than five minutes since Aghar Pind had left him—surely too soon for Tajal Ali to have arrived. Was Aghar Pind playing a double game? No—hardly that! It would have cost Aghar Pind five thousand pounds.

There was no sound of struggle, and caution came to Peter. And at the curtain he halted, and drew one edge of it slightly aside—and stood staring like a man dazed at the scene within.

Tajal Ali *had* arrived! The man was standing just inside the entrance, his face ugly with fury, his lips working—and facing Tajal Ali, but quite near the curtain, stood Marion and Aghar Pind—and Marion's hand, as once before, was hidden in the folds of her dress, and her face was set and very white—and Aghar Pind was like a man suddenly grown old, with hanging, pendulous jaw, and twitching hands; but his eyes, darting in all directions, as

though seeking some avenue of escape, were like those of a hunted rat's.

Tajal Ali's voice addressing Aghar Pind in English so that, no doubt, Marion too might understand, reached Peter now.

"And so," snarled Tajal Ali, "you did not think that I would come so soon, or overhear things that were not meant for my ears! You dog! And you would put something in my drink, would you?—and you and the girl here would make your escape? It is well, Aghar Pind—for so you shall! But it will be an escape that is made but once. Ah, you are afraid! Yes, my Aghar Pind, you are going to die! And the girl shall see you die and *remember*. And afterwards"—he thrust his hand into his pocket, and took a sudden step forward—"she will——"

Marion's hand swung suddenly outward from the folds of her dress, pointing her revolver at Tajal Ali.

"Stop!" she cried out sharply. "You shall not touch him!"

Tajal Ali, his hand still in his pocket, halted abruptly.

"Ah," he said, a sudden ominous softness in his tones. "I did not know that you were armed. It is too bad! I do not like delays. And perhaps it may be an ill thing for Aghar Pind that he should live a few minutes longer, for death then may come in a more unpleasant way—and less mercifully than at my hands alone, for I——"

"Shoot!" Aghar Pind's voice came in a frantic scream. "Shoot quick, Miss Sahib! It is his life or ours! If he returns and bring men with him, the Miss Sahib and I, too, shall know that which is worse than death! Shoot, that we may——"

And then the words were blotted out from Peter's consciousness and his brain seemed suddenly to reel—a *laugh* was echoing in his ears—a laugh like a woman's, like a trill, dulcet—the laugh that a man had laughed on the night that Murchison had died—and it was Tajal Ali who was laughing now. Tajal Ali! Tajal Ali! The words were suddenly a wild pæan in Peter's heart. It wasn't the end! There was life, and hope, and the right to win a woman's love now—for here was one of the guilty men—here was one of the men in whose place he, Peter, had been made to stand as the murderer of Tom Murchison. Here was——

Good God!—what was Aghar Pind doing? The man had wrenched the revolver out of Marion's hand! Peter tore the curtain violently aside—his mind racing madly as he leaped suddenly forward. Didn't the fool know that Tajal Ali must *live* now—that here was the proof of his, Peter's, innocence—that no harm or hurt must come to Tajal Ali until he was forced into the dock and all men knew the truth, and——

It happened quickly, in the winking of an eye—even as Peter leaped from behind the curtain. There was a flash, the roar of a report, as Aghar Pind darted toward Tajal Ali and fired. And then that *laugh* again, for Aghar Pind's shot seemed to have missed—and then another report, but no flash now, for Tajal Ali had fired through the pocket of his jacket. And Aghar Pind screamed out, and staggered—and as though by some superhuman effort recovered himself, and hurled his body through the few feet that still separated him from Tajal Ali, and grappled with the other.

With a bound Peter was at their heels—but Aghar Pind's rush had carried them out through the en-

trance—and now they were swaying, lurching, struggling on the narrow platform, and inches only separated them from its edge and the yawning gulf below.

And Peter saw the revolver drop from Aghar Pind's hand, and, under the scuffling feet, disappear over the edge of the platform. He saw the two men writhe and twist and turn, locked in each other's embrace—and with a cry that rang out hoarsely over the roar of the waters, he snatched at them as they toppled—snatched at Aghar Pind, who was the nearer of the two, and his grasp, frantic though it was, held—but they were too close to the edge—and, straining with every ounce of strength to hold them and preserve his own footing, he merely succeeded in tearing Aghar Pind free from the other. He caught a glimpse of Tajal Ali's face, gray with terror, as the man reeled back, and, with grotesquely flopping arms, plunged downward into the depths below.

Gone! As though suddenly nerveless, Peter stood there staring at the spot where Tajal Ali had disappeared. There was a sense of horror upon him at the ghastliness of the man's end; but dominant was a sense of stupendous and inhuman irony, as though voices rose up out of the black depths before him, and Tajal Ali's loudest of all amongst them, and mocked him, and jeered at him, and that the roar of the waters was but the roar of laughter which fate, with unholy, taunting mirth, flung in his face. He had found the murderer, found the man and the proof he sought—only to see the murderer die before his eyes, and the proof forever pass beyond his reach.

He was conscious that Aghar Pind lay huddled there almost at his feet. Yes, of course—the man had been wounded—that shot through Tajal Ali's

pocket—perhaps the man was dead. He was conscious, too, that Marion now was bending over Aghar Pind, supporting the man in her arms. But, though he was conscious of these things, they seemed to be strangely apart from him, things that were only vaguely real, things that were curiously *outside* himself. And he stood there, his face strained and drawn and haggard—his eyes, as though held by some hypnotic influence, still upon the spot where he had seen Tajal Ali die.

A voice, high-pitched, shrill, strangely out of control—Aghar Pind's—roused him, brought him back to a realization of his immediate surroundings. Aghar Pind had raised himself on his elbow, and seemed almost to be struggling in Marion's arms. The man's face was stamped with the pallor of death, his eyes were fixed and a glaze was creeping over them.

"The money!" Aghar Pind cried out. "Five thousand pounds—that is my price, for I am a poor man. It is a great sum, but thus it was that Blake Sahib, and I, Aghar Pind, made agreement together, and Blake Sahib will go with me to the white men who sit in authority, that I may claim the reward, and the sum shall be paid, and Blake Sahib shall hang in order that the Miss Sahib shall escape, but I——" The man's voice wavered, and, growing suddenly fainter, began to wander. "How shall Tajal Ali know what passes while he is asleep? . . . Where is the Miss Sahib? . . . The white sahibs are fools with their women, but greater than all fools is Blake Sahib . . . Did I say that I was poor? . . . They shall talk in the village of the wealth of Aghar Pind, and——"

Aghar Pind spoke no more. Peter saw a convul-

sive movement shake the man's form, and saw him fall back again in Marion's arms—and he knew that Aghar Pind was dead. And Peter neither moved nor spoke. His mind seemed dazed again, blunted. So Aghar Pind, too, was dead—and there remained only Rahim Dé. Was fate intent on more mockery—another tangling of the threads! He might never prove his innocence now since Tajal Ali was dead; but, if he would, he could now live out his life as a fugitive, for there was no longer any pledge to keep with Aghar Pind. But that was for the afterwards—what *now?* Would Marion trust Rahim Dé? Had she even agreed to trust Aghar Pind? They would have taken her by force if she had refused to go. Would it come to that now? Was that the part that he, as Rahim Dé, must play?

He saw her lay Aghar Pind gently back upon the ground, and rise slowly to her feet—and now she turned her face full toward him, and her lips were drawn with pain, and there was agony in her eyes. And then she made a queer, half faltering, half imperative gesture with her hand.

"You, Rahim Dé," she said in a toneless voice, "If you speak English, tell me where Blake Sahib is, for you must know where he is, even as Aghar Pind, from what he has just said before he died, must have known, though he told me a little while ago that he did not. And even if you do not understand English, you will understand the name. Listen! Blake Sahib! Blake Sahib! You understand that, don't you? Bring him to me, for I know now that he sold his life for mine, and I will not go a step from here without him, or with any other man."

And a lump came into Peter's throat and choked him, and a sudden mist swam before his eyes—and

in the soul of him was a great and overwhelming joy.

"Marion!" he said hoarsely.

She put her hands to her face and stared at him—and took a step forward—and halted again. And in the blue eyes was a strange amaze and incredulity, and then a sudden wondrous light came into them, and they were starry, shining through gathering tears. And she came forward another step, very slowly, very hesitantly.

"You—Peter! You!" she cried out in a broken voice. "You—you are Rahim Dé!"

"There was no other way," said Peter. "In the cabin, I——"

"Wait!" she said, and a flood of crimson surged into her cheeks. "In the cabin you told me that it was—was love for me that had brought you there, and I said—I said what now I wish I had never said. And I wished it, too, Peter, before you left me there, for I believed you when you gave me that revolver, and—and when it was too late I—I called out to you to come back. Are you listening, Peter?" She had come very close now, and now the tears were streaming down her cheeks unchecked, unheeded. "I do not say these things, Peter, to make my shame the less for having doubted you, for all my life now I shall pray God and you, Peter, to forgive; but—but only that—that you should know I believe in you before I learned from those last words of Aghar Pind how much greater still your love was—so great that I can never measure it, never tell you how great it is. Oh, Peter, Peter, what love is this of yours, that made you bargain away far more than life so that I——" Her voice broke utterly, and suddenly like a tired child she stretched out her hands to him.

A great cry welled up from Peter's soul:

"Marion! Marion!"

He caught her to him, drew her close, and yet closer still, and her head was pillowed on his shoulder, and his hand fondled the golden hair, and he lifted her face to his and kissed her.

And after a little while Peter spoke again—but now there was a sudden anguish in his voice.

"There—there is something I must tell you, Marion," he said unsteadily. "My innocence is not only still unproved, but something has happened here to-night which makes that proof now, I am afraid, almost an impossiblity." He paused, striving to control his voice; but, instead, it broke through all restraint. "Oh, my God, Marion—Marion!" he cried out passionately. "How can I lose you! How can I let you go! But don't you understand? Don't you see what it means? If I go on with an almost hopeless search, I must be all my life a man without a name, a fugitive, a homeless wanderer."

She raised her face to look up into his—and for a long minute the tear-wet eyes seemed to bid him read her soul.

"From to-night," she whispered, "I go where you go, Peter."

CHAPTER XXII

BURNT MATCHES

BACK in Tajal Ali's cave, Marion was lighting Aghar Pind's lantern as Peter joined her again. He had sent her away with that little task as an excuse while he had carried Aghar Pind in through the entranceway and laid the body on a divan. It was a meager office that he had performed for Aghar Pind, and he was not quite sure why he had done it, since, if he were to be honest with himself, he was obliged to admit that he was not moved by the man's death other than in the sense that all death must move one, for Aghar Pind's services had been far removed from the altruistic—but, if for no other reason, it would have been a callous and unseemly thing to have left the man lying out there on the rock floor.

But Peter's face was grave and troubled from another cause as he took the lantern from Marion's hand, and—because he dared not trust himself—pretended to be in anxious haste, and, bidding her follow him, started instantly forward into the darkness. He had had his hour out there on the rock platform. "From to-night, I go where you go, Peter." It could never be! She had given him her love, her faith, her trust, and these were dearer to him than his life, but he would have given that life willingly now that this love should not have come to her. He had never meant that it should unless he were a man free again, his name vindicated—and out there on the rock love had overwhelmed them both and broken down all

barriers. "From to-night, I go where you go, Peter." It could never be! If he could get her safely out of here, safely back amongst her own people, safely out of peril and danger—then, after that, their lives must lie apart. God knew what his would be—he prayed God that in its memories this love of hers would not bring her unhappiness and misery more than she could endure! And so he had put from him the intense yearning, the mad, almost uncontrollable desire to sweep her into his arms again when he had taken the lantern from her. Had she wondered a little at his brusqueness?

He smiled back at her now over his shoulder, as though making amends.

"We must hurry, Marion!" he explained. "We may have all the time we need; we may not have nearly enough—but, in any case, we must not lose a minute." And then, as though to belie his words, he came to an abrupt halt the next instant, and swept his lantern around a rock chamber that, unlike any of the others through which they had passed, was utterly bare of ornamentation. "Look!" he exclaimed. "Wireless, radio—a broadcasting set! I don't know much about things of this sort; but, from the look of them, I miss my guess if there are any that are more powerful or longer-ranged in this part of the world! It's rather obvious proof of the power, anyhow, of these devils—to say nothing of their cold-blooded efficiency!"

"Peter"—Marion reached out and touched his arm —"*is* there a way out through here?"

He did not answer for a moment. They were walking quickly forward again, and now the cave had narrowed into much smaller proportions, and the floor had become broken and uneven, and all signs of furnishings and occupancy were gone.

"Peter," she said again, "you are not very *sure?*"

"No," he said now; "I only know what Aghar Pind told me—what he probably told you, as well."

"He did not tell me very much—Tajal Ali came too soon," Marion answered. "He said—and it was so strange a thing to say—that the cave was opened with a key."

And then Peter stopped again, and suddenly, uncontrollably, a startled cry escaped from him. *A key!* It had never had any significance before; but now—to-night——! His mind was in sudden riot. He thrust his hand into his pocket. Yes, there it was—amongst his six shillings.

"Peter, what *is* it? What is the matter?" Marion cried out anxiously.

"A bit of fancy—perhaps nothing more," said Peter, a sudden quiet in his voice; "and yet, if it is true that this cave is opened with a key, then the chances are I've got one of those keys in my pocket—and have had it there for months."

"Let me see it," she said eagerly.

Peter took the key from his pocket, and held up the lantern that she might see.

Marion's brows came together in a little pucker.

"What a curious looking key!" she exclaimed. "I never saw one that was anything like it before!"

"No," he said; "but that's in its favor now—I should say it would require a very curious looking key to open a cave!" He replaced it in his pocket, and led the way forward again.

"But," Marion asked in a puzzled way, "what makes you think it might be the key we need?"

"Because to-night," Peter replied, "I discovered that Tajal Ali was present when I was thrown half unconscious into the motor boat the night that Mr. Murchison was murdered, and——"

"Peter," she interrupted softly, "when you told me your story in the cabin to-night, you didn't tell me anything about a key."

"No," said Peter, "it was a detail then that I did not think had any significance."

"Go on, then," she said. "Tell me about it now."

"There's not much to tell," he answered. "The thing kept glistening in the sunlight next morning when I was adrift in the boat, and, because I was a bit done in, I suppose, hurt my eyes until I couldn't stand it any longer, and I crawled along to the stern of the boat, and—well, that's how I found it—sticking up in the grating. As for the rest, I'm sure it wasn't Murchison's, so it must have belonged to Tajal Ali or one of the men who were with him—and this is Tajal Ali's cave. Of course," he ended with a sudden, jerky laugh, "it might be Tajal Ali's key—and still be the key to anything but a cave!"

"It might be—but it isn't!" declared Marion with sudden conviction, her voice eager and excited. "I am certain it is *the* key—and nothing else!"

"Then," said Peter—and forced a light, cheery note into his tones, "all we have to do is to find the keyhole."

They made their way along, then, for a little while in silence. The cave had become so narrow now that they were forced to walk in single file—Peter ahead with the lantern, Marion a step behind. And at times now the roof dipped sharply, and they were obliged to stoop, and once almost to crawl for a yard or so; but they made quite rapid progress in spite of these difficulties, and had traversed perhaps a quarter of a mile, when Marion spoke again.

"Peter," she said suddenly, "you—you said a little while ago, before we came in here, that something

had happened to-night to make it almost an impossibility for you ever to—to prove your innocence; and yet just a few minutes ago you said you had found out to-night that Tajal Ali was one of those who—who killed Daddy Tom. I don't understand, Peter. Surely it is just the other way around—since you know that Tajal Ali was one of the murderers."

"Tajal Ali is dead," said Peter grimly. "That is the answer to your question. He died almost before I grasped the fact that he was the man I wanted."

"But, Peter," she cried, "even if he is dead, he was not alone at Daddy Tom's island. When you told me your story, you said there were a lot of natives and a ship; and if you know that he was there, then it must have been with this same ship and these same men who are here now. If we can manage to get away from here, from this island, surely we can find our way back, and—and—bring the authorities—and capture them."

Peter shook his head.

"We might do that," he said; "but there is no proof against any one of them, and they've native cunning enough and to spare not to convict themselves. With Tajal Ali it was a different matter. I *knew* him to be the man. Not much in the way of proof—only a laugh—but a laugh one could never forget, and——"

"I—I heard it to-night," she said in a low, strained way.

"Yes," said Peter—and suddenly his voice was hoarse, and he laughed out mirthlessly. "Well, Tajal Ali would not have escaped trial and conviction—I would have seen to that! With Tajal Ali cornered, some of these others might have been *made* to talk if they thought they could save their own skins. But with Tajal Ali gone——"

"Yes; I know!" interrupted Marion swiftly. "But there is always the connection between them."

"Connection!" Peter cried out sharply—and laughed mirthlessly again. "And if there were! And if they could be brought to account! And even if Tajal Ali were still alive! I am a fool! I have lost my head to-night because I heard Tajal Ali laugh. There is still the murder of Jaffray on board the *Isis* —and there is no connection in respect of that, for Tajal Ali wasn't there—and none of these men were there!"

He felt her hand reach out and creep into his.

"Oh, Peter—Peter," she whispered, "what does it all mean?"

But now Peter shook his head again, and made no answer—only for a little while he held Marion's hand tightly in his as they went along.

It was Marion who broke the silence again.

"It isn't because I am afraid, Peter," she said hesitantly, "or because I want to think of difficulties, that I am asking this; but, even if there is a way out of this cave, what will we do then? This is an island, of course, and we will still have to get away from it."

"I asked Aghar Pind the same question," Peter answered quietly. "I don't blame you for asking it—I only wonder that you haven't asked it before. According to Aghar Pind the island on the other side of this mountain is large and thickly wooded, and so there should be no difficulty in keeping safely hidden as long as it is necessary. He said that, so far as he or any of the crew knew, there is only one man who lives on it—a sort of sentinel that Tajal Ali keeps there, as I understand it. The brig never comes to the island except in the night, and there is a small rocky islet a little way out from the shore where a

light is always shown in answer to one from the brig—and sometimes the brig has put about and gone immediately out to sea again. And he said that sometimes from the deck of the brig, when the night was clear, he has seen the sentinel sailing back to the island in a large boat. He also said that there were a great number of islands around here, and some of them only a few miles away; and his plan was to make from one to another of these until we could find white men, and so get back to civilization. That's all I know, Marion—except that, somehow or other, we must get hold of that boat, and——" He broke off abruptly, with a sharp and sudden exclamation. "Look!" he said.

They had turned a corner in the cave and were faced with a blank wall.

"It doesn't go any farther!" Marion exclaimed in dismay.

"No," said Peter gravely; "and there isn't any door or opening—or any keyhole!"

"Perhaps," she suggested hopefully, "there was a passage that branched off somewhere there behind us, and we missed it as we came along."

Peter shook his head.

"No," he said decisively. "I was particularly on the look-out for anything of that sort. The only passage is the one along which we have come. I'm afraid it's a *cul de sac.* The natives are full of this sort of romancing—a cave that is opened with a key!"

"But the opening, or exit, if there is one," said Marion quickly, "need not necessarily be here exactly at the end of the passage. We merely took it for granted that it was, didn't we, and so weren't looking for it anywhere else?"

Peter's lantern was sweeping in all directions

around him—and suddenly he stooped and picked up something from the ground.

"No," he said sharply; "if it's anywhere, it's here! Look at this!"

Marion leaned forward.

"A burnt match!" Her brows gathered, and she stared at Peter.

"Yes!" said Peter, and there was a note of excitement in his voice now. "Somebody has been here, and Aghar Pind said that no one except Tajal Ali and some of the other chiefs were ever allowed to come into the cave, and there is certainly nothing inviting enough about this spot to bring them this far if the opening were farther back."

"Then it *is* here!" cried Marion eagerly. "I'm sure of it now! Search, Peter! Search every inch of the walls! Give me the lantern and you use your matches!"

Peter nodded, handed the lantern to Marion, struck a match, and bent close to the section of the wall nearest him, passing the little flame slowly and carefully over the surface of the rock until the match burned his fingers and went out. He struck another match —and another. And suddenly it all seemed an impossible, mad and insane thing that he was doing! Just solid rock everywhere, seamed and scarred, and jagged! A little way off from him Marion's lantern flickered up and down—and something of her eagerness and the assurance with which she seemed to carry on her task came to him again, and he went on grimly, doggedly, lighting more matches.

And the minutes passed.

There were not many matches left. He counted them. Eight! He dared not use them all. Well, two more, then—that would leave a little reserve for any emergency and——

"Peter!" Her voice came shaken with excitement. "I've got it! I'm sure I have! Give me the key, Peter! Quick!"

He ran instantly to her side.

"Where?" he asked tensely, as he pulled the key from his pocket. "What have you found?"

"See!" she said—and held the lantern close to what appeared to be no more than a minute fissure or tiny fault in the rock. "Let me try the key! I *know* it will fit!" She seized the key and, with trembling fingers, thrust it into the little aperture. "It's *moving!*" she cried. "See, Peter—see! We've found it!"

A great irregular slab of rock, as though it were falling away from the wall where its seams ran deep, swung slowly and silently inward—and Peter stared like a man bereft of his senses. The other side of the slab was wood covered, obviously a section of a panel; and, through the opening which was some four feet high and three feet wide, he could see into a room which was flooded with moonlight.

Marion's voice came in an awed, almost frightened whisper now:

"It leads into a *house,* Peter. What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Peter answered in an undertone, "except that we must take care not to make any noise." He took the lantern from her hand and extinguished it, then returned it to her. "We'll get the trick of this panel first—in case we have to bolt back in here." He pressed gently at first, then with all his strength against the slab of rock, but could not move it—nor did any manipulation of the key have any effect upon it. "There must be another spring or something somewhere," he said. "Well, no matter—we haven't time to hunt for it anyway, and——"

But Marion was leaning through the opening, star-

ing into the room beyond; and now, suddenly, she reached back, and, clasping him feverishly by the arm, pulled him forward until they both stood in the room itself.

"Look, Peter—look! Out there through the window!" she breathed wildly.

The window, low-silled and giving on a veranda, was at one end of the room, quite close to where they stood. It was wide open, and, through it, Peter's startled gaze fixed upon the placid surface of a lagoon a short distance away, where, bathed in the moonlight, a ship lay at anchor a few hundred yards out from shore.

"I'm not mad, am I, Peter?" she breathed again. "You know what boat that is! Tell me I'm not mad, Peter!"

"It's—it's the *Isis!*" Peter whispered.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CONSPIRATORS

FOR a moment they stood as though spellbound, staring out through the window; then Marion spoke again:

"Then—then, they've brought the *Isis* here, too, and father——"

But Peter had become suddenly aware of a low murmur of voices from near at hand, and now he laid his fingers quickly upon Marion's lips. In the few seconds that had elapsed since they had entered the room, his eyes, riveted there in startled amazement, had not left the window; but now he looked critically around him. It was a large room, a very large room, and in the moonlight he could see that around the walls, and making two aisles down the center, were long rows of glass cases, while the walls themselves were hung with all sorts of native objects—like a room in a museum, he thought. A little way down the room on the other side was a partially opened door through which there seeped a faint glow of light, and it was from this doorway, he now discovered, that the voices came.

Perplexed furrows gathered on Peter's forehead. There was something here that he did not understand—like pieces of a puzzle that would not fit together. If Tajal Ali had intended to make captives of everybody on the *Isis,* and even bring the *Isis* to the island, why had he not left Marion on board? She would have been equally in his power, and besides——

A voice, no longer in a murmur, but as though raised

in exasperation and impatience, came suddenly from the room with the partially closed door:

"Curse it, what's keeping Tajal Ali? He should have been here by now!"

Peter felt his arm grasped quickly, almost convulsively, as though Marion was suddenly unsteady on her feet and was clinging to him for support. He looked at her anxiously. Perhaps it was the effect of the moonlight, but her face seemed to have gone deathly white.

"That's Mr. Rand's voice!" she whispered tensely. "Peter—Peter!" She was trembling violently. "Don't you understand, Peter? And this is *his* house—here—and *connected* with that awful place back there!"

And Peter stared at her—and his brain for a moment was in turmoil. Rand's voice—yes! He realized now that it had sounded vaguely familiar. It was Rand's voice, of course—and Rand was asking for Tajal Ali; but the house——

"How do you know it's his house?" he whispered back excitedly.

"Because of this room," she answered instantly. "I am sure of it. Look at all those glass cases, and those curious objects on the walls! It can't be anything but a museum, or part of one! Don't you know that Rand is recognized everywhere as an authority on native life, and that his collection of all sorts of things pertaining to the manners and customs of the various races in this part of the world is quite famous?"

"No," said Peter—and his hands clenched suddenly at his sides; "I didn't know it."

"That—that was really the pretext for our visit—to spend a few days on his island and see his collec-

tion." Marion was staring wildly now across the room at the lighted doorway. "Oh, Peter!"

The blood was racing madly now through Peter's veins. Snatches of what Aghar Pind had told him pounded at his brain: The chief that was above Tajal Ali . . . . the chief who was a white man, but who was always disguised as a native aboard the brig. *Yes!* And there had been a white man there that night at Murchison's island—a white man's voice.

The voices were murmuring again.

"If it's true!" The words came in a mad, low rush from Peter's lips. "My God, if this is true, then Rand is the head and front of these beasts, and the *real* murderer of Tom Murchison—and it's no wonder Tajal Ali's lair has never been found, for the whole island here is camouflaged by Rand's scientific reputation. Who would ever search this island for the hiding place of a band of cutthroats under such conditions? And it accounts for more—something Captain Mumm told me—of many crimes that have been committed in the last few years where certain necessary inside knowledge was first obtained in a way that no one could fathom. Rand would have had the entrée anywhere, and would have been welcomed and even lionized by men of standing wherever he went."

"And—and if it's true," said Marion—and now there was a sudden horror in her voice and eyes, "he was responsible for the whole trip and the capture of the *Isis,* though I don't see how he did it; and—and—he even asked me to marry him. Why—why did he do that? Why is the *Isis* here now? Where is father? Peter, Peter, what are we to do?"

"We're going to see who's in there with Rand, if we can," Peter answered grimly. "Be careful now—don't let them hear us!"

They stole silently across the room and came to the lighted doorway—and halted there, crouched back against the jamb of the door. The door was little more than ajar, but through the opening they could see the corner of the room where two men sat at a table.

Peter gnawed at his lips to keep back a sudden cry. Rand and Lahat Khan!—and between them on the table was a heap of pearls. Rand was counting the pearls, and now the voices of the two men came quite distinctly.

". . . Not all in Sydney," Rand was saying, "and only a few to each man on the list that Tajal Ali and I will make out for you when he comes. You'll have time to go to Melbourne, for Garth can't pick up two hundred thousand pounds in gold in a hurry even if it is for his daughter's ransom, and no matter how much he's worrying about her safety. And see that you get a good price! You're dealing with thieves, but it's just as safe for them as it is for us. There could never be any suspicion that these were Murchison's—Blake's standing for that little job!—and there's no possible means of identifying them, in any case. You don't have to sacrifice them—and see that you don't!"

Lahat Khan grinned avariciously.

"I will get the price," he said.

"And look out for your own hide," cautioned Rand bluntly. "Down and back you'll be alone on the *Isis*, and though they'd take intense delight in throwing you overboard instead of taking orders from you, you're safe enough with the girl in our hands; but you've a few little peculiarities ashore that have sometimes got you into trouble before, and we can't afford to have you found somewhere in the gutter with a knife in

your back. You keep away from drink and the dives!"

"Have no fear!" answered Lahat Khan complacently; and then blandly: "But, perhaps, there is a warning for you too. Look out that the girl doesn't see you here on this island!"

Rand laughed contemptuously.

"Do you think I am a fool? That's why Tajal Ali is staying ashore. I shan't go near the place."

"And so she will be with Tajal Ali—and you made love to her!" Lahat was grinning again. "Do you think it is quite safe?"

"Bah!" Rand leaned back coolly, and lighted a cigarette. "I made love to her because it was the surest way of forestalling even the possibility of suspicion. If she'd fallen for it, I would have gone back to Sydney, after we had got the ransom out of Garth, for that had to be divided amongst all of you—and married her."

"And after that," purred Lahat Khan, "very soon after that, an *accident* might have happened to her father, and you would have had a great fortune! Is it not so, O *Tuan* Rand?"

"You have an imagination, Lahat Khan," said Rand smoothly. "But, as it is, in spite even of that fool Jaffray's murder that we saddled on him as well as Murchison's, I believe she is in love with Blake."

Lahat Khan's face seemed to light up with a sudden pleased animation.

"That was a neat trick!" he exclaimed. "That paper you wrote!"

"And a blundering, fool trick of yours to talk with an open door near you!" replied Rand with an unpleasant smile.

Lahat Khan's brows drew together darkly.

"Many times you have said that," he muttered a little sullenly. "It pleases you! But did we not always meet down there in the lower alleyway when we had reason to talk together? And was it not also by agreement we met there on that night?—for after I had left the stateroom of Blake and Captain Mumm, Garth kept me busy, and I had a chance only to give you a signal to meet in the accustomed place. How else, without waiting until the morning, could I have made known to you what I had learned? It is true, Jaffray's door was open, but the cabin was dark. Who would have thought he was inside? It was only a little after midnight, and I had seen him a few minutes before on the upper deck. And is the blame all mine? Is it not true you also knew the door was open? He must have seen us in some way out there, and crept to his door to listen, and——"

"And was well repaid," Rand growled, "since he learned you had recognized one of the survivors from the *Break O'Dawn* as Peter Blake, the man you had seen through the window-blind in Murchison's room on the night—as you were also careful to mention! —that you and I and Tajal Ali and our men murdered Murchison and stole these pearls. That let Blake out, and Jaffray had us cold. After that, it was Jaffray's life or ours, not only on account of Murchison's murder, but so that we could keep in touch with Tajal Ali and bring the *Isis* and the brig together." He laughed out suddenly in ugly mirth. "Thanks to Blake, though, it was safe enough to get rid of Jaffray—Blake has been very useful to us!"

"Even so," said Lahat Khan, still with a sullen note in his voice, "it was *my* ears that were sharp enough to hear that little sound like the shuffling of a foot with which Jaffray betrayed himself in his excite-

ment. If it had not been for me——" He broke off abruptly, and a puzzled look came into his face. "It is strange that Peter Blake has not been found!" he exclaimed. "Where has he hidden?"

Rand shrugged his shoulders.

"What does it matter?" he replied indifferently. "He's probably still on the *Isis*, and Mumm's helping him. If he manages to get away it will make no difference to us—he has served our purpose. If he got on the brig, or gets on this island, he'll be found sooner or later, and we'll make short enough work of him, so that——"

The voice seemed to Peter to have become lost, engulfed in some mad upheaval and commotion in his own brain. He was gripping at the door jamb until the knuckles were white knobs across the back of his hands. Jaffray! Murchison! His throat was dry. His lips were parched. Something was smoldering within him, seeking to break forth in eruption, something he could not define, save that all the emotions he had ever known as a human being were aroused, and seemed to be massing into one gigantic effort to vent themselves in some cataclysmic, superhuman way. Anger, fury, a desire for vengeance, a savage eagerness to launch himself upon the two men, sitting so smugly there, who had toyed and juggled with his life, callous of everything except the gaining of their own abhorrent and vicious ends, had seized upon him; but, too, he knew a strange, glad singing in his heart, a surge of uplift, as though some monstrous weight that had once crushed him down and pinioned him in impotence and tortured him was suddenly removed, and he was—free. He felt Marion's hand open and close with tense, spasmodic clutchings at his arm as she clung to him; and as she stood close beside him he felt too

the wild beating of her heart—but her face he could not see because it was in shadow.

And then the voices floated in upon his consciousness once more.

"Curse it, what's keeping Tajal Ali?" snarled Rand impatiently again.

"There is yet plenty of time, for there is still an hour to daybreak," Lahat Khan answered unconcernedly. "Tajal Ali has much to do—stores to land, orders to give before he let the brig sail away——"

But now Peter heard no more, for suddenly his brain was clear and coldly remorseless, intent upon a plan that had flashed into his mind, and, drawing Marion with him, he edged noiselessly back from the door—and, still guiding her, moving as silently as they had crossed the room in the first instance, he led her to the open window. And now he could see her face again, and though it was as pale as if the blood had been drained from it, it was alight and radiant, and her eyes were wide and shining as though mirroring a great thanksgiving that had suddenly filled her soul.

"Peter," she whispered, "don't you see? Oh, don't you realize what this means? You look so grim and stern, and I—I feel as though I should go down on my knees and thank God that all the world is to know the truth now about Daddy Tom and Jaffray!"

"Yes!" he said. "God knows what this means to me—to us! And in the days to come we will try to show our thankfulness; but now there is something else that we must do." He took her in his arms and held her close to him—for he was afraid that what he had to say might bring her dismay and fear. "You understand, don't you, Marion, that neither of these men must be allowed to get away—or even have a chance to hide those pearls?"

"Yes, Peter," she answered, "I understand that—if there is a way to do it."

"There is a way." Peter pointed through the window. "We must get word to the *Isis*. It's quite likely that Lahat Khan has got a boat down there on the beach; but if not, then——"

"I see!" she interrupted quickly. "Then we must swim out to her."

"That is what I was going to ask you," said Peter. "Could you swim out to the *Isis?*"

"Oh, easily!" said Marion confidently, after a quick glance through the window. "Of course, I could! It's not far."

"That's splendid," said Peter quietly, "because that's what I want you to do, Marion, if there is no boat; and as soon as——"

"You want *me* to do!" she echoed in a puzzled way. "But you, Peter? You speak as though you——"

"I am going to stay here," he said.

"Peter!" She clung to him in sudden fear—and with wide, anxious eyes stared up into his face.

He drew her still closer to him, his arms around her.

"There is not the least danger," he said reassuringly. "But I cannot take a chance of either Rand or Lahat Khan getting away at the last minute through that passage—there is always the possibility that the brig hasn't sailed yet, and if Rand or Lahat Khan by ill luck took alarm, the first thing they'd do would be to make a dash for it through the cave, and if the brig were still there they would certainly escape. We could sail away on the *Isis* ourselves, of course, for the brig could never catch us—but that would be the last we should ever see of Rand or Lahat Khan. You realize that, don't you, dear?"

"Y-yes," she said, with a little catch of her breath.

"There really isn't any danger," said Peter again—and smiled at her now. "I've too much to live for now to take any unnecessary risk. All we need to do is to get a half dozen men ashore as quickly as possible. If they land on the beach behind that little fringe of trees out there to the left, they can get up to within at least fifty yards of the house without the slightest chance of being seen. You must arrange to have two of them come directly here to me—they can slip in through the window. The others, of course, must guard the outside of the house, so that when we spring the trap there will be no escape anywhere. All that counts is speed and silence. If Rand or Lahat Khan get no warning, the rest will be child's play."

"But—but *why* are you staying, Peter?" she asked tremulously. "If the plan works out they would be caught whether you remained here or not. You—you are holding something back. Why are you staying here?"

"Against the thousandth chance that for some reason or other they might come into this room and find the panel open, and, with their suspicions aroused, take alarm," Peter answered, and smiled at her reassuringly again.

"And then?" she breathed anxiously.

"And then," said Peter, "in the cave, at this end of it especially where it is so narrow and there are so many turnings, it would not be very difficult to hold them back until your men could take them in the rear."

Her voice broke with a little sob.

"I will go, Peter! But I am afraid—terribly, terribly afraid for you," she said—and suddenly her arms were about his neck, and she lifted her lips to his and kissed him—and then, turning quickly away,

she stepped out over the window-sill, and was gone.

Peter swept his hands across his eyes—for somehow there was a mist before them, and she seemed to have vanished from his sight. No, he could see her now—but just a glimpse of her—a glimpse of a slim figure like some nymph in the moonlight running swiftly—and then she had disappeared behind the fringe of trees.

For a moment more Peter stood there motionless, then he stole cautiously back across the room and took up his position just in front of the open panel that led into the cave. From here, he could still command a view of both the window and the door of the room from which the voices of Rand and Lahat Khan still reached him.

The thousandth chance! He shook his head grimly. It had served to reassure Marion—that was all. He was not at all sure it was an *even* chance that the men from the *Isis* would get into the house without being discovered—the mere kicking of a pebble as one of them came along, for instance, might upset it all; and long before they came, either Rand or Lahat Khan, for some reason or other, or for no valid reason at all, might easily step into this room—and the open panel was here for them to see. The thousandth chance! Well, perhaps! So much the better if it were! He was sure of only one thing—that while he lived neither of the two would get back through the passage to join their men in the cavern or on the brig!

If only that revolver hadn't been lost! If he even had a weapon of *any* sort now! He looked around him. Many things, queer and fantastic, decorated the walls—and the moonlight made them look queerer still. A little to one side and well above his head was

a cluster of what he took to be blow-pipes, and hanging from the center of the cluster was what looked like a native club. He reached up, and finding that the club was merely suspended from a peg by a thong fastened to the handle, he took it down. It was not a weapon to be despised! He balanced it in his hand. It was short-handled, and the head of the thing, a huge knob of gnarled wood, was heavily weighted.

The minutes passed—five—ten—fifteen of them. Surely as many as that—perhaps more! It seemed hours since Marion had gone out through that window there. Had she been able to find a boat? Had she been obliged to swim? She must have reached the *Isis* long ago. They would be on their way back now—they even ought to be here by this time.

Constantly he heard the voices from the other room—sometimes they were raised as in heated discussion. At times he heard one of the two, Rand probably, pacing up and down the floor with quick nervous strides—and at such moments he crouched low, keeping the glass cases between him and the lighted doorway.

He tried to analyze his own feelings—and succeeded only in inducing tumult in his mind. He was free—free now! The past was like some evil dream from which he had awakened to find love, and Marion; whereas, in the dream, again and again, most utterly he had lost her. But she was his now and the future—— Why did his brain riot so? What was this other thing that kept thrusting itself upon him as though it were some ugly entity out of the dream itself? Ah, yes! He felt the blood leave his face, and a strange trembling come into his hands. Rand! Well, Rand would not escape! Rand would——

Peter barely suppressed a cry.

They were coming now, coming from the *Isis!* His eyes, straining through the window, could make out a number of forms emerging from the fringe of trees, and, spreading out fanwise, begin to run toward the house. The thousandth chance had not materialized! The thousandth——

Rand's voice came with a grumbling oath, as the door of the other room was flung suddenly and impatiently open, and Rand, with Lahat Khan beside him, stepped out over the threshold.

"Damn it!" Rand snarled. "He wouldn't keep us waiting all night without some good reason—and if he hasn't a good one, he'll answer to me! Back you go to the cavern, Lahat Khan, and find out what's the matter! I can't take any chance of the girl seeing me, and——"

The sentence was never finished.

Peter, crouching now, saw Rand halt suddenly and stare out through the window.

"White men! White men!" Peter heard Rand mutter in a dazed and puzzled way; and then in a sudden shout: "Quick, Lahat Khan—there's something wrong! Quick—the panel! They've landed from the *Isis,* and are making for the house! Quick, you fool! Do you hear? The panel! They'll be on us in a second!"

But Peter now was on his feet—and his club swung above his head. And Lahat Khan, the first of the two forms that came rushing toward him, halted abruptly.

"It's one of Tajal Ali's men," gasped Lahat Khan. "He's got the panel open!"

And then Peter laughed—for he had forgotten the disguise of Rahim Dé.

"No!" he said. "It's Peter Blake."

There was a flash, the roar of a report, as Rand, be-

hind Lahat Khan, fired—and the shot missed—and Lahat Khan went down as Peter's club crashed full upon the man's head.

And only Rand was left.

And Peter leaped for Rand—and staggered back with a confused singing in his ears, a flash that blinded him, and some strange, stabbing hurt as though something hot and burning had been thrust through his body—and recovering himself he smashed at Rand with the club and hurled the other backward, and a glass case toppled to the floor and crashed in splinters.

And Peter fell—and in falling he saw forms leaping through the window—and then blackness came.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE OPEN ROAD

PETER opened his eyes and stared about him in a troubled way. The surroundings were very strange, and he was in bed. He could see that it was bright sunlight outside, though the window shade was drawn. Where was he? What had happened? He lay for a long time striving to puzzle his way out of what seemed to be some mental maze that had entrapped him and which persisted in the most irritating way in baffling him at every turn. Perhaps it was because he was tired. He was conscious of lassitude and fatigue, as though he had been upon some long journey that had overtaxed his strength, and because of which it was grateful now to lie still and rest. But where had he come from, and where was he now?

He stirred a little. There was something bound tightly around his body. He felt under the bed covers with his hand. It was like a bandage. His eyes wandered around the room again. Beside the bed was a little stand, and on top of it were a number of medicine bottles, and there was a small glass with some ruby-colored fluid in it, and a clinical thermometer sticking out over the edge. Yes, of course! He remembered now. It was incredible that he could have forgotten! That passage through the cave—the open panel . . . Last night in Rand's house . . . The fight . . . Rand had shot him, and then he had leaped at Rand and flung the other back against one of the glass cases and knocked it over just as the men from the *Isis* had come in through the window!

Of course! It was all quite clear now—and this, of course, must be Rand's house. Perhaps, if he could look out through the window, he could see the *Isis* in the lagoon. What had they done with Rand? He was quite sure very grimly sure, that Rand hadn't got away, but——

The door was being opened—very slowly, very carefully, very quietly. And then a golden head appeared in the opening, and blue eyes met his across the room. Marion! It was Marion—Marion! And Peter said no word, but suddenly stretched out his arms to her—and saw the color come and go in her face—and heard her repeat his name over and over in a low, glad way—and then she was kneeling at the bedside and her face was hidden on his shoulder.

And for a moment neither spoke. And then Peter broke the silence.

"Last night," he said, "when you went out to the *Isis,* Marion, I——"

She stopped him with a little cry.

"Oh, Peter, dear," she said, and raised her head, and he could see that the blue eyes were dewy and that her lips were quivering, "your 'last night' is nearly five days ago! And so—and so"—she laid a finger in pretty authority upon his lips, and then kissed him softly—"and so, you see, you must not talk or excite yourself, for you have—have been very ill."

"Five days!" echoed Peter helplessly. "Do you mean it is five days since——"

"Yes," she broke in quickly, but now there was a sudden faltering in her voice. "We—we were afraid, Peter, that we would not get here in time, and that——"

"Here?" Peter interrupted in a puzzled demand. "Where is 'here'?"

"In Fiji," she answered. "We came as fast as the *Isis* could travel—to—to reach a doctor. And once we thought that you were—were—but, oh, Peter, I do not want to think of it ever again—ever again, dear! And now you must not talk. Haven't I already told you that you must not excite yourself? If the doctor knew, he'd never let me come into the room again."

"I'll excite myself a great deal more, if you don't tell me a lot of things I want to know," he answered.

"No, Peter," she said firmly.

"Yes, Marion!" he mimicked her tone. "I'll get out of bed and walk around the room if you put on airs!"

"Peter!"

"What happened to Rand and Lahat Khan and the rest of them?" demanded Peter.

"Rand was killed by one of the men from the *Isis,"* she said in a low tone. "He wouldn't surrender. He barricaded himself behind some of the cases in the corner of the room, and wound d two of our men. Lahat Khan is a prisoner, and there's a gunboat on its way now to the island."

"And Captain Mumm?" Peter persisted. "God bless his ugly face!"

"He's going to buy another schooner with his insurance money as soon as he stops worrying about you!" She smiled tremulously. "He has been practically sleeping on your doorstep ever since we got here, and he was one of your nurses all the way over."

"One of them! So there must have been another. Who was it?"

No answer.

"Dear heart!" murmured Peter.

Her fingers crept into his hand and nestled there.

"Peter," she said, "you simply mustn't talk, and I

mustn't talk to you; but if you'll promise to be good and not ask any more questions, I'll tell you one thing more. Will you promise, dear?"

"I promise," said Peter with mock gravity. "Cross my heart!"

"Then," she said, "as soon as you are well enough, we are going to England, you and father and I, on the *Isis*."

"But I don't want to go to England," objected Peter.

"Oh, yes, you do!" she answered.

"To a high stool in a London counting house!" He smiled wryly.

"Oh, no, Peter! Listen! It seems that your old family solicitor has been cabling everywhere to get track of you, and just about the time that the wireless was sent from the *Isis* stating that you were on board, the chief of police in Sydney received one of those cables asking for information about you. Naturally he followed that cable up, more for the sake of getting information about you than of supplying any himself. I don't know all the details, but your solicitor, it seems, has been able to sell quite advantageously, he says, those timber tracts you spoke of as belonging to your father's estate, and he wants you to come home."

"Good old Sir Martin!" ejaculated Peter; and then with a whimsical little smile: "Well, I'm glad he has. I would have had the nerve to ask for you from your dad, all right; but I would never have dared ask you to set the day until I had got a really topping job, you know, and——"

"Hush, Peter!" she said. "As if that mattered! And now, that's positively all! You have made me a promise, you know."

"But I'm going to amend it," said Peter brazenly. "I'll promise to keep quiet, if you'll stay here beside me."

"Very well," she agreed, and made an attempt to bring a very businesslike severity into her voice. "But you must go to sleep!"

Peter hid a little smile.

"I'll try," he said meekly.

"Then close your eyes!"

Peter closed his eyes obediently—but after a moment opened them by just the smallest fraction, that he might see her there with head bowed forward over the edge of the bed, and drink in all the wonder of her, and make himself believe that it was all true and not a dream. But dreams came, and he lay there very still and quiet and dreamed true dreams that seemed untrue, so great were the joy and happiness, and the glad contentment that they brought. And a great thankfulness filled his heart.

And for a long time he lay there without movement; and then very carefully, with gentle stealth, he felt her fingers begin to disengage themselves from his hand. And he let them go until almost they were free, and then he closed upon them and held them tightly.

She looked up quickly—with a little gasp.

"Oh, Peter—you haven't gone to sleep!"

"I was afraid you would go away," he said.

And then her eyes were full of sudden tears—and suddenly her cheek was laid against his own, and her face was hidden from him.

"Peter! Peter!" she whispered. "I shall stay always—for always and always! *My* Peter!"

THE END

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